

**A new start for Landcare
Adapting to a changing environment
Tony Gleeson¹**

Introduction

My talk to day is not about reliving the past years of Landcare. And it is not about giving homage to the great achievements of Landcare.

Today I want to talk about revival, a revival of Landcare.

Some of us have writing and talking for some time about the need to revive institutional arrangements for rural Australia. It started in earnest with the *Australian Values-Rural Policies* symposium² which Snow Barlow and I convened in Canberra eight years ago. But it hasn't just been all words-we have established the Australian Land Management Group and all that goes with it.

The bottom line is that many of the institutions (policies, programs, organisations etc) servicing rural Australia are past their use-by-date. They are based on a narrow set of beliefs and values and generally they are poorly structured to deal with sector-wide issues. They are however politically powerful and there is little short-term joy in seeking change. Today will be no exception and in truth I have hesitated for I know from experience how vengeful existing power structures can be.

You come to tribal gatherings like this because you are a rusted-on Landcarer or you get paid to come, or both. You come to connect with other tribal members and to be reassured that what you are doing is good and useful. You come to learn from others. You come to be comforted by amazing Landcare statistics and local good works.

But what I have to say is that Landcare will not survive on its current course. It will not survive unless it evolves. It will not survive unless it competes in the market place for ideas. It will not survive unless it is visionary at all levels, including at the state and national levels.

This is not something I dreamt up because *The Wombat* organised another Landcare Conference. As I said earlier this goes back some eight years. This is why we drew on expertise in ecology, in agribusiness, in land management, in behavioural science, in system and software development, in policy and politics to design ALMS. This is why we created the ALM Group.

My mentor Geoff Penton-all old men need a younger mentor-tells me I need to acknowledge the organic grass-roots nature of Landcare. He may be right for this is indeed what has made Landcare so successful. But maybe also we should define leadership and acknowledge its importance.

For me leadership is about vision. Leadership is about being creative. Leadership is about enabling. Leadership is about building innovation roadways and letting innovators speed along them in whatever way they choose. Leadership is needed throughout organisations.

We have a new and complex world of environmentalism, of organisational complexity, of nimble and varied networking modes, and of a growing and legitimate community expectation that conservation goals are being achieved.

We need to consider what land mangers need in this changed environment and how Landcare can best respond.

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² See www.alms.org.au

But first, some of my own land manager experiences particularly at the interface with public policies and programs, including with Landcare.

Learning from experience

In many ways I am the median beef farmer: aged over 60, investment over \$1 million, most net household income from non-agricultural sources, son and daughter not returning to the farm, bouts of clinical depression and, like many land managers, some lessons from other experiences.

But land managers are a varied lot and in one regard I am not median – that is I have been involved as a primary land management decision maker for some 30 years, about double the national average.

In the early 1990s we fenced off a major and badly eroded gully feeding into one of the three northern tributaries of the Clarence River in NSW. There have been major conservation benefits (erosion control; improved water quality; habitat for bettongs; coucal pheasants etc) and significant cattle management benefits.

In the mid 1990s we got a Bushcare grant to help extend this fencing. We signed a comprehensive and very detailed contract. The responsible Bushcare officer was retrenched soon after we signed the contract and there has been no monitoring or audit of expenditure. Due to there being no water flow into the alternative watering dams we did not exclude cattle for about four years after the date specified in the contract. However there now have been major benefits in erosion control, water quality, platypus habitat, recreational value and cattle management.

All of these fences have been repaired since a flood in January this year.

The message is that beliefs and values are important - good things can happen just because we want them to - we don't always have to do an economic benefit-cost analysis - we don't always have to have public investment to cover externalities - and when the landholder wants to do it the cost of accountability is greatly reduced.

Eucalyptus regrowth is a major problem for us. However in the late 1990s and more recently we were encouraged to apply for funding to plant native trees. We did so and planted trees around the house. These trees have no conservation value. In 2007 we invited the CMA to develop with us a whole-of-farm timber management plan but the invitation was declined.

The message is that there are substantial risks and losses in establishing goals and targets independent of responsible and informed land managers on an individual and /or on a small group basis (and we have the tools to do this effectively).

In 2006 I signed up for a series of 8 one-day property planning workshops funded by our CMA. Because of travel commitments I was not able to attend the workshops. However neighbours inform me the workshops were interesting but that they have not lead to practice change.

Early this year I attended a two day environment management system workshop funded by our CMA largely to see how it stacks up with what we do in ALMS. There were some really good monitoring tools. However it was a laborious paper based system, not well aligned to international standards, not credibly audited and unlikely to lead to continuous improvement.

The message is that processes to improve motivation and sustained activity and hence environmental outcomes need to be well designed and supported.

Just recently we tendered successfully for support to manage one sixth the area of our property solely for conservation purposes for the next 25 years. I estimate the costs of fencing and weed control and the loss of production to be about five times our tender price. The cost is largely due to the proposed restrictions on cattle grazing (limited to 15 days/year). I am not

aware of any scientific evidence or practical experience to support such a grazing regime. Had we be able to negotiate a different conservation-grazing balance or one governed by outcomes we would have tendered for an agreement covering a greater area.

The message is that negotiated partnerships can lead to big outcomes from small incentives but getting the partnership defined requires considerable skill and technical input.

And the big message is that none of the above, at considerable cost to the taxpayer and us, has addressed the big issues, which are our grazing and weed management.

There are many reasons for this but I will discuss just three.

First, the design of policies and programs, particularly at the national level, do not adequately recognise the need for land managers to be actively engaged in and held responsible for improving land management - for caring for country.

We need to more strongly advocate using land managers to care for country because the simple sense of it is not apparent in so many industry and government policies and programs.

Let me say at the outset however that I do have a problem with the agro-political claim that we farmers are all conservationists. It leads to some pretty wacky explanations of how we have created our serious environmental problems.

Most farmers respond to norms, policies, regulations, incentives and punishments---just like people really. We need to look at these things to find the ways forward.

We need to advocate using land managers to care for country because environmental management is primarily about people and their behaviour. It is not management of natural resources—the great Natural Resource Management myth.

To appreciate the significance of land managers in caring for country we need to recall that:

- Farmers alone as land managers have \$150 to \$200 billion invested in land-based assets
- Farmers spend about \$30 billion a year on activities that affect land
- There are about 350,000 people who work farm land in some way, and
- There is the 40 % of Australia beyond farming

We need to:

- Focus on the impacts of land managers rather than on the resources per se
- Involve individual land managers in setting goals and targets for their properties, and
- Align public and landholder investment. Programs such as NHT, NAP and now CFC are significant but represent less than 1% of total expenditure on land impacting activities. In my own case it is somewhat pointless for taxpayer funds to be spent on conservation on one block if I am stuffing up the rest.

Second, our policies and programs are not motivating land managers

Landcare and other programs have increased the desire and willingness of land managers to improve environmental outcomes but it is another thing altogether to motivate willing land managers to take action. This is a critical distinction. The primary constraint to improving land management is a lack of motivation.

Most analysts present complex pictures of the constraints to improving land management. However unless the primary constraint of lack of motivation is addressed then returns on investments to remove secondary constraints will be severely constrained.

Many of the arguments put forward to explain poor land management are spurious.

For instance there is widespread and unfortunate acceptance of the notion that improved agricultural profitability is a prerequisite to improving environmental outcomes.

Clearly financial capability is important but the 'you have to be in the black before you can be green' mantra flies in the face of, for instance:

- the fact that land prices generally exceed what is justifiable on expected agricultural returns - there is no shortage of cashed-up wanta-be-farmers
- the fact that at least half of farm households earn more net income from non-agricultural sources than from agriculture
- the importance of capital gain to the wealth of land holders
- the lack of data showing a positive relationship between environmental outcomes and individual property or industry profitability
- the many production-conservation win-win situations

Many argue for greater scientific information and certainty before investing in improving environmental outcomes notwithstanding the essential continuous improvement nature of science and that many of the truly revolutionary innovations in land management originate from land managers themselves.

Others allege a lack of extension and knowledge broking to be a primary constraint but my experience is that once you decide to do something it is fairly easy to access more than enough information and advice.

As land managers we deal with enormous complexity and variability. However our policy and program arrangements should not add to the complexity.

My proposition is simple.

We need to enable the rewards for improving land management. This cannot happen unless we have a way of recognising good land management.

The rewards for good land management can be intrinsic (from the doing) and/or extrinsic (from having done).

Intrinsic motivation: Most 'NRM' policies and programs constrain intrinsic motivation through the external establishment of goals, targets and processes, through excessively high transaction costs, through fragmentation, through inappropriate time frames for funding and execution, and through ineffective and laborious accountability processes.

Generally speaking we have the knowledge and tools necessary to rectify these deficiencies. For instance:

- We need a greater focus on supporting positive impacts and avoiding adverse impacts as compared to focusing on the state of the resource per se
- We need to use the tools now available to enable landholders to determine goals, targets and strategies property-by-property having taken account of landscape considerations.
- We need to integrate rather than fragment ecological and reward considerations.

Extrinsic motivation: If we had a system or systems for recognising improving land management then rewards could flow from organisations involved in purchasing environmental outcomes or other land based products, primarily food and fibre products.

And before any of the carbon and eco-service tragics begin to feel superior let me be very clear about one thing.

We will not usefully progress whilst ever we break ecosystems down into little bits and establish institutional arrangements to deal independently with that particular bit. We do it for erosion, for trees, for salinity, for acidity, for water, for one-eyed ground dwelling rattle-snakes—and it looks as though we might do it for carbon. We too quickly forget that the problem has been generated because we price only food and fibre, at the expense of ecosystems. Adding another little ecoservice into the priced basket is not a good way to go.

It is ironic that Australian farmers lament being price takers but generally are reluctant to develop marketing arrangements that reward features, including environmental considerations, for which they have comparative advantage.

It is also ironic that we now have this strong push to use so-called market-based instruments (essentially pricing) to improve land management but we don't invest in implementing a system that identifies the product we should be pricing, that is the holistic product of improved land management. There is no way markets can work effectively if the product is not defined.

And third, program delivery is a mess

If I could have addressed only a single issue this might have been it.

Since 1974 I have been involved in most aspects of project funding, execution, and accounting. I have worked in State government, in CSIRO, as a private contractor, as an R&D Corporation Director and later as a program co-ordinator for northern Australia for a different Corporation. I lead a research team investigating the application of competition policy to agricultural R&D. I have studied and published on the nature of creativity and its implications for project design.

On the basis of past experiences and more recent extensive experience in managing NRM projects my conclusion is that our environmental program delivery is an unholy mess.

Since 1996 there have been five Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) examinations of the NHT and NAP programs. Additionally to my knowledge there have been three reviews of the NLP.

The prime outcomes of review after review is to heighten planning and transaction costs, to emphasise indicator and target setting divorced from land managers and the realities of land management and to add to the number of organisations and individuals involved in program administration.

We need to stop stuffing about with organisations, funding and people.

We need to respect the interactive and interdependent nature of ecosystems and hence we must avoid fragmentation through a naive application of an eco-services approach.

We need to align market and other drivers for improving environmental outcomes

We need to stop using short term funding to address long term issues

We need to accept that nearly all environmental outcomes (including biodiversity) are an inseparable mix of public and private goods and hence we need co-investment between individual landholders, government and industry programs, consumers and the community.

I could go on-but enough.

Why bother with Landcare?

This is the bit you will like for Landcare has many solid foundations.

At 23 years old Landcare is relatively young and at the grass-roots generally it still has the energy and innovativeness of youth; compared with for instance Departments of Agriculture which date back to 1854 and have changed little since then - still working to a development, productivity, feed the world, scientific deterministic paradigm.

The Landcare population is concerned about the environment and hence Landcare does not have the constituent problems that constrain many representative industry organisations.

Landcare works across land uses and industries and hence avoids the artificial industry-by-industry barriers to improving environmental outcomes; 60 % of Australian farms operate two or more industries.

The Landcare brand is widely recognised and Landcare Australia has been highly successful in getting corporate support.

Landcare has sufficient flexibility to enable innovation and relevance at the local level.

The next phase for Landcare

Now this is where things might get contentious.

The danger is that influential people will reject the need for revival given that I haven't got a perfect plan for the future. But that would be silly for I don't claim to have all the solutions. I do have however a reasonable track record in the early detection of organisational senility.

The signs of senility are implicit in the following.

Landcare needs a well articulated and marketed vision. As Landcare members we don't need someone telling us what to do but we do need to be part of a dynamic and innovative organisation.

Landcare involvement in recent DAFF led activities to attempt yet again to define sustainable agriculture and indicators say more about organisational capture than about how to build a highway for land managers.

Landcare needs an independent, respected and visionary voice that is heard in industry, government and community.

When have you last read or heard of something that resonates from national Landcare?

The reality and the image of Landcare needs to move beyond one dominated by small remedial projects to one addressing the fundamental causes of environmental degradation.

Have we got the balance right between the effectiveness of Landcare activities and the need for public exposure along roadways and of community groups planting trees along creek banks?

Landcare leadership needs to protect dedicated Landcare support workers at the local level who have been short changed now for many years resulting in excessive turnover and inadequate training.

Where is the career pathway for Landcare support workers?

Landcare needs to improve the efficiency of delivery of recognition and of support for improving land management. Support is currently fragmented, short term and poorly and expensively administered.

The October 2003 review of the National Landcare Program (NLP) concluded administrative costs approximated 2 percent.

Yeah-and dogs don't get fleas.

In summary

We need to protect the essence and assets of Landcare.

But romantic recollections of where we have been will not take us forward.

We need organisational revival and we need new tools to do new jobs.

Finessing administrative processes based on flawed concepts is not a useful strategy and is well summed up in what my son said to me in 2002:

'Get a grip Dad; hoping for rain is not a drought strategy'.

Further information

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About the ALM Group

The Australian Land Management Group, the ALM Group, is a not-for-profit organisation whose charter is to improve environmental outcomes in rural Australia in ways that enable recognition of the achievements of land managers and of their support organisations. Landholder members of the Group across four States use an internationally recognised environmental management system.