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Ken Keith

[hkeith1540@bigpond.com](mailto:hkeith1540@bigpond.com)

## Re-visioning Landcare to deliver ecosystem services west of the Divide

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This brief races ahead of discussions on acceptability and feasibility of paying landholders for delivery of ecosystem services – it goes straight to implementation, suggesting that Landcare groups and Fencing Clusters can play key roles in facilitating landholder adoption, measurement and payment for services.

### Landcare background

During the 1980s, land management groups were forming in Queensland in parallel with community participation initiatives in Western Australia and Victoria. Arguably the first ‘grassroots’ community action in this period was the formation of the Lockyer Watershed Management Committee as a Bicentennial project in 1981, with several subgroups tackling local issues. Then in 1984, the Inglewood Shire Bicentennial Land Management Committee formed to develop land management guidelines for the Shire (subsequently becoming the Inglewood and Texas Landcare Committee) and in 1987-88, conservation committees formed at Charleville (South West Rural Conservation Committee) and Goondiwindi (Waggamba Conservation Committee).

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) fostered several soil conservation groups in the 1950s and 1960s. However, these fell away when government introduced a mandatory program for erosion control in the Darling Downs and Burnett regions in the early 1970s. Six advisory committees were formed to advise on priorities and implementation. When the mandatory approach was abandoned in the mid-‘80s, DPI resumed encouragement of community responsibility for land management action. In 1987-88, nine ‘landcare’ type committees formed from the advisory committees.

In this same timeframe, further impetus came from the Cattlemen’s Union. A proposal put to the Gympie Beef Liaison Group in February 1988 by Jock Douglas was a huge game-changer, legitimising Landcare amongst Queensland’s grazing communities (Government efforts had to that time focussed on cropping lands). At least three groups formed in 1988 through this initiative – Gympie, Dalrymple (Charters Towers) and Maranoa (Roma) – and doubtless others. As well as catalysing these groups, the Cattlemen’s Union established Land Care sub-committees in each district. It also pushed for a national Landcare program.

Other Landcare groups operating when Queensland Landcare was launched in March 1989 included: Arcadia Valley, Calliope, Capricorn Coast, Central Burnett, Chinchilla, Murilla, North Burnett and Taroom. With appointment of a State Landcare Coordinator and Regional Landcare Facilitators, plus the impetus of the National Landcare Program (announced July 1989), the number of groups soon increased dramatically from the initial 24 groups. However, from 1991, the Queensland Government moved to form catchment coordinating committees to improve catchment-wide natural resource management. Then in 1999 the federal Government, seeking a more accountable structure (catchment committees were non-statutory and varied greatly in capacity), added another layer, the regional natural resource management groups. A three-tiered structure heralded serious implications for the resilience of Landcare groups. After peak enthusiasm in the 1990s, some Landcare groups have struggled to maintain motivation, partly due to difficulty in obtaining funds for projects and hire of coordinators. Some have closed, some are hibernating and some struggle to survive. Participation in an ecosystem services program would give new purpose to flagging groups, re-invigorating valuable latent social capital.

The Queensland Water and Land Carers (QWaLC) web site shows approximately 45 member groups with primarily land management objectives west of the Great Dividing Range. Five are catchment management committees across the regions, 15 Landcare groups are in the primarily cropping area of the Condamine Catchment and there are about 25 other Landcare groups from the NSW border to the Gulf. Also included in the QWaLC list are 30 recently formed Fencing Cluster groups. Fencing Clusters are small groups of contiguous landholders who gain government grants to cover about 50% of the cost of dog-proof fencing material. The number is likely to increase with a recently announced round of grants. Although fencing to protect stock has generally improved land condition, not all are motivated by a landcare ethic in their management practices. (A notable exception is Clovelly Hills Cluster which was a finalist in the Innovation in Agriculture and Land Management category of the 2018 Australian Landcare Awards). But evidence of improved condition might be a step towards interest in providing ecosystem services. How can the social capital built into cluster groups become a force for the delivery of ecosystem services?

### **Which ecosystem services?**

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report of 2005 defines “*Ecosystem services*” as benefits people obtain from ecosystems. It distinguishes four categories of ecosystem services: *supporting services* such as nutrient recycling, soil formation, habitat provision and pollination; *provisioning services* such as food, raw materials, medical resources and energy; *regulating services* such as carbon sequestration, control of predators, pests and diseases and purification of water and air; and *cultural services* such as spiritual and historical heritage, recreation, science, education and therapy.

Let us assume that it is agreed that public funds should reward landholders who manage properties in ways that provide a national good by improving support, regulatory or cultural services while also providing food and/or fibre for national benefit. Decisions about which services governments, corporations and philanthropists might reward, which can be measured/audited, which require research investment and which services landholders are able to provide are matters for robust discussion and negotiation. Measurement might be rudimentary at first but this should not prevent action; resources would then be put into refining the measures.

Let us assume that a tranche of measures for services that can be provided by suitable landholder practices is available. We can reasonably assume that landholders will need technical support in adopting suitable practices and that the auditing of practices and effects will need to be carried out efficiently as demand increases.



### **Landcare facilitation of ecosystem services delivery**

Landcare groups and Fencing Clusters can be foci for efficient technical advice and for efficient auditing (properties within a group or cluster audited simultaneously when the group is ready for audit). Technical advisers for selected services would probably be employed by regional NRM groups. Auditing would be contracted out to accredited providers.

As Clusters are small and regions are big, Clusters could be ‘clustered’ into larger aggregations within a common agro-ecosystem for management of ecosystem services, with incorporated bodies, perhaps called District Landcare Committees, deciding which ecosystem services should receive technical assistance within the district, which Clusters are ready for auditing, and perhaps also have a role in distributing payments. These committees would have a paid Landcare Coordinator who would advise the Committee and foster practice adoption by smaller Landcare Groups and Clusters, and encourage formation of new groups.

This concept of two-tiered Landcare is not new. While Queensland adopted Victoria's name 'Landcare' for community groups dealing with local land management issues, the structure varied from the Victorian model. Early Queensland groups were larger, generally Shire-based and addressed more diverse issues. This changed over time with smaller groups forming, the larger groups often acting as project fund managers for smaller groups. It is noted that the Committees envisioned by the Cattlemen's Union at Gympie in 1988 had expected roles quite similar to those espoused here for District Landcare Committees: awareness raising, recommending suitable land management practices, administering incentives, and advising on research and development needs and extension resources (Douglas 1988).

Membership of a District Committee could vary from place to place but might include representation of landholdings in the district plus the coordinator, a representative of the relevant regional NRM body and an independent Chair. In districts where Clusters don't apply, the committee would operate with current Landcare groups and encourage formation of new groups to take advantage of opportunities for technical advice and efficient auditing. Some current groups might have the capacity to take the role of District Committee. Where viable catchment management groups exist, these could carry out the functions of the District Landcare Committee. While the focus here is on rangelands, the concept is easily transferable from west of the Divide to all of Queensland. Participation would be voluntary and not preclude other agendas.

This proposal looks ahead of the present need for discussion on the desirability and feasibility of rewarding landholders for ecosystem services but hopefully it forestalls some perceived barriers to implementation, while also showing the potential to re-invigorate Landcare action west of the Divide.

**Status:** Draft thoughts, no requirements

**Bio:** Ken Keith is retired; once an extension officer in Soil Conservation Branch DPI (1975-1996) and then lecturer/researcher at The University of Queensland (1997-2008).

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