

Re-visioning Landcare to Deliver Ecosystem Services West of the Divide

Ken Keith

hkeith1540@bigpond.com

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This paper 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 in the rangelands of Queensland.

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 sub-groups 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 1987–1988 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 the 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 the encouragement of community

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responsibility for land management action. In 1987–1988, 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 focused 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 25. However, the Queensland Government soon moved towards an Integrated Catchment Management approach, believing that major issues needed whole-of-catchment action rather than a patchwork of Landcare projects. Four pilot Catchment Coordinating Committees were formed in 1991, followed by others. Some Landcare groups felt as though they had been supplanted by the catchment groups. Then, in 2000, the Australian 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. This pushed Landcare groups further down the ladder for funding and priority attention.

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 and some struggle to survive. A 2017 survey of the original 25 groups showed that six had ceased and four were in hibernation or serious decline (Keith, 2017). On the upside, 60% have continued to function for 30 years, showing laudable resilience in the face of adverse policy headwinds.

Funding and support for Landcare groups depended heavily on the extent to which the regional bodies recognised Landcare groups as partners, but often the only funds available were via competitive bidding for projects to achieve regional goals, which in most instances were dictated by federal government priorities. The principle of Landcare groups acting according to their local priorities was vanishing. Professor Peter Bridgewater, Chair of the National Landcare Network, succinctly summarised the decline in momentum when introducing a 2019 review of Landcare:

The early phases of Landcare were characterised by great momentum and a high level of participation but it also demonstrated that local groups with limited resources were unlikely to produce landscape level change. Subsequent phases were intended to better deliver nationally coordinated programs, but to the extent that significant control and power was transferred to regional bodies or central and state government, many community Landcare groups suffered disempowerment and decline. An important finding from the review is that these approaches all have their strengths but need to be concurrent (Bridgewater, 2019).

The problem was exacerbated by government moves towards a purchaser–provider approach in the Caring for Country program from 2008, where the government purchased NRM goods from the regional bodies, focusing on environmental outcomes that could be quantified in purchaser–provider agreements, without regard for outcomes such as learning, improving skills

and building trust. The community-based model was further eroded when proposals were invited from a wider range of organisations than in the past and embraced a wider range of policy instruments, including market-based incentives (Curtis et al., 2014; Robins & Kanowski, 2011). This competitive purchaser–provider approach has been continued by the current government, with billions of dollars allocated to environmental management programs such as the Emissions Reduction Fund, Agriculture Biodiversity Stewardship Program and drought mitigation initiatives without being built into the community NRM framework, thus missing the opportunities for more effective delivery through networks of community groups.

This paper proposes ways to benefit from community-based delivery of rewards to landholders for ecosystem services, while giving new purpose to flagging groups and re-invigorating valuable latent social capital.

Which Groups and Which Ecosystem Services?

The Queensland Water and Land Carers (QWaLC) website 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 New South Wales 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?

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 while also providing food and/or fibre. Decisions about which *services* governments, corporations and philanthropists might reward are matters for discussion and negotiation. Development of appropriate tools for monitoring and auditing, for research into sustainable management models and to identify services landholders are able to provide will require specific consideration. However, much information on specific elements already exists.

If a reward for sustainable management practices is available, we can reasonably assume that landholders will need technical support in adopting suitable practices.

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 could be employed by regional NRM groups. Auditing would be contracted out to accredited providers.



Field day on 'Trafalgar', Dalrymple Landcare Group (Photo: R. Shepherd).

As clusters are small and regions are big, clusters could be linked to form 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, coordinating its provision, and perhaps having a role in distributing payments. These committees would have a paid Landcare Coordinator who would advise the committee, 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 and 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.

Conclusion

This proposal looks ahead of the present discussion on the desirability and feasibility of rewarding landholders for managing ecosystem services and identifies the opportunity to re-invigorate Landcare structures west of the Divide.

Landcare in Queensland gained high momentum in the 1990s, but government policies to control and redirect funding later impeded groups' efforts to achieve their local goals, so momentum faltered. This can be re-invigorated if ecosystem service program implementers recognise the efficiencies of collective action through community-based natural resource management groups and provide the support resources needed, and if groups see a benefit in linked action to provide sustainable services. Although social benefits are not included in the purchaser-provider equation, social capital will accrue as a bonus with delivery through networks of Landcare groups and fencing clusters.

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Author Profile

Ken Keith (retired) was an extension officer in Soil Conservation Branch, Department of Primary Industries (1975–1996) and then a lecturer/researcher at The University of Queensland (1997–2008).