

Queensland Landcare 21st Jock Douglas AO September 2010

In 1989 21 years ago Landcare began officially in Queensland and immediately began to grow.

We can look back on the achievements of the Landcare movement with justifiable pride because Landcare brought about significant change.

There has been change to the landholder perspective; a move from fast forward development mode to a more considered and planned management mode which embraces conservation values. The quiet achievers who had been managing well all along were brought to the fore with their stories. They were the heroes.

There was a change in the Government perspective. Empowerment of local community groups was adopted as the basis for Landcare program support. Empowering communities means giving away power and not all political representatives and government employees were comfortable with the new approach.

There was a change in social dynamics. Landcare Groups included a diversity of community members and whole families in a loose local group, taking responsibility for the local environment and implementing action.

It was a revolution, a quiet revolution.

We started officially in 1989 with about 6 Landcare groups – mostly converted from the Soils Conservation Associations.

In the late 1990's Landcare in Queensland peaked at some 420 Groups. Today in 2010 Queensland Landcare is in decline with about 250 groups.

Now Landcare is struggling. So what has happened?

Over the past three weeks I've contacted quite a few people who have been involved in Landcare and asked that question.

Today I'll look back to Landcare beginnings, to the underlying principles, the structure and the success stories; then to the changes and the decline.

Today I'll look forward to the regeneration of Landcare and what could be done to achieve that.

Reflecting on Landcare's Genesis

So it began 21 years ago in 1989?

Well a few things happened before 1989. There were many people involved in the genesis of Landcare. I was but one of them and add my recollections.

We might first look at some of the lead-up to 1989:

1987

Commonwealth Departmental Officer Lindsay Northrop from DPIE (now retired) recalls that in early 1987 a Victorian farmer Pam Robinson and a Queensland cattle industry leader Jock Douglas were talking publicly about the issue of land management and community involvement. Pam was talking about a movement called Landcare that was emerging in Victoria. Lindsay was involved in the National Soil Conservation Program and DPIE people thought it was missing something and that something was community involvement. DPIE arranged to have Pam and I invited to Canberra for a meeting with DPIE Minister Kerin so he could be aware of these developments. Lindsay saw this as a beginning of what was to become Landcare. He later became the Departmental Officer in charge of the National Landcare Program.

Late in 1987 the Cattlemen's Union a new Queensland cattle industry organisation with a reputation as a change agent circulated a paper on improving land management among other farm organisations, to Universities and CSIRO, and to political representatives. The gist of this CU paper was that the National Soil Conservation Program should be transformed to include all lands not just cropping lands, it should be based on empowered community groups and it should be named Landcare.

1988

- In 1988 the bi-centennial year, things started happening. Landcare had struck a chord and groups were starting to form.
- John Kerin and his department were working on a support basis for a national program. Senator Cook and his Department became involved.
- The National Farmers Federation had to be won to the cause. A few powerful Agricultural Industry Organisations saw dangers in embracing Landcare because that declared the land was not being well managed. Rick Farley became CEO of the NFF and in late 1988 guided a resolution supporting Landcare through the NFF lead by the Victorian farm leader Heather Mitchell. The NFF and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) through Rick Farley and Philip Toyne joined forces to support Landcare. A decade of Soil Conservation was devised under Minister Cook and quickly had its name changed to the Decade of Landcare. 1988 and 1989 were to be the formation years with the Decade to be launched in 1990. Commonwealth funding became available to the States to support the formation of Landcare Groups and their activities.
- However in Queensland the Minister responsible for land management Neville Harper saw dangers in the Commonwealth Labor Government taking over a State role through Landcare and rejected it. The then Premier Mike Ahern saw it differently following being confronted by the Presidents of all the Industry Organisations who supported the Landcare concept. Harper was directed to provide support from his Department and performed a remarkable about-face on the issue.

1989

- In 1989 Landcare was on the move in Qld with Groups rapidly being formed and funded. Don Begbie was appointed State Landcare coordinator with 4 regional coordinators: Rex Fisher, Debbie Atkins, Len Lesleighter and Geoff Penton. A Queensland Landcare Council was established with Wally Peart as Chairman.
- Funding applications were directed to the State coordinator, approved by a Departmental process.
- Wayne Goss and Labor swept into power in a landslide in December 1989. Ed Casey was appointed Minister for Primary Industry with Landcare support among the responsibilities of his Department.

1990

The Decade of Landcare was launched by Prime Minister Hawke and Minister for the Environment Richardson. It's important to note that Landcare began as and remains a social movement. The National Landcare Program and its successors National Heritage Trust were Government programs supporting the landcare movement. Likewise Landcare Australia Limited supported the movement with high-level profiling and with that wonderful 'caring hands' logo. The landcare movement was based on community groups taking on local environmental responsibility role and devising and implementing local action, empowered by Commonwealth and States' recognition and support.

1991

- In late 1991 Minister Ed Casey told me he intended to reform the Queensland Landcare Council and asked me if I would Chair it. I said I would but only if the role of the Council was expanded and be a more representative body. Casey asked me to write a paper for his consideration. The proposals were accepted. From then the QLC was more representative with a majority of landholders, representation from the Queensland Conservation Council, Greening Australia and 3 Departments. It provided policy advice to the Minister for Primary Industries; the State Assessment Panel came from the Council membership for assessment of all NLP projects submitted, including all State Government projects. It gave people in Landcare Groups confidence in the decision

making process for funding. It meant that the QLC was in touch with those active groups and well aware of what they were doing. I recount this because it shows the trust there was then between the community members, Departments and the Government. This was community empowerment at a high level.

1992 and onward

- Onward from 1992 Landcare Groups continued to be formed and in many cases undertook funded environmental projects suited to their particular localities. Many groups flourished without projects or funding, simply operating as vital community action groups. The confidence of landcare groups and members grew. Landcare was in high growth mode through the Decade. These were exciting times.

Let's look at what people were saying about Landcare in 1994

I attended the 1994 National Landcare Conference held in Hobart and had the role of summing up at the end. Here are quotes from some of the speakers :-

(national Landcare Facilitator) **Helen Alexander** :

"The most imaginative sustainable development policy happening anywhere in the world."

(National Farmers' Federation CEO) **Rick Farley** said :

"The unique experiment in empowering the community has grown into a social movement."

But an unimpressed (aspiring Greens Senator) **Bob Brown** said :

"It's a triumph of publicity over outcomes."

(Department of Primary Industry and Energy Secretary) **Geoff Miller** said :

"A strong sustainable Australia is within our reach, but we must reach out for it."

(Aboriginal Leader) **Tracker Tilmouth** said :

"You've actually got land to have a problem with, you lucky bastards."

(National Landcare Advisory Council Chairman) **Joe Baker** said :

"Landcare is a concept, an ethic, a way of life, originally individually held, now held by groups."

Winsome McCaughey said in one of the most significant statements of the conference :

"The landcare movement is actually teaching us how to govern ourselves all over again."

That quote from Winsome McCaughey says much. Landcare wasn't just an environmental management revolution; it was a quiet social revolution.

Looking back there are thousands of projects and activities from hundreds of groups involving many thousands of people. In Queensland there are significant achievements by outstanding Landcare Groups. I outline a few of these as examples:

Barung Landcare

Formed in 1989 its continuing strength and success make it a stand-out Group in Queensland. The key factor may be the diversity of backgrounds and skills of its membership. Barung Landcare established a commercial presence with native plant nursery thus backing the considerable community volunteer effort with its own funding stream. Barung Landcare has been able to:

- Establish a competitive, self-sustaining and educational local native plant nursery providing over 1.5 million local provenance native trees for the local area.
- Instigate one of the Sunshine Coast's premier tourism events - the Maleny Wood Expo, *From Chainsaw to Fine Furniture™* running for the 13th year in 2009.
- Achieve a high standard of environmental extension for local landholders gain community and regional volunteer support valued at well over \$250 000 per year.

Brigalow-Jimbour Floodplains Group

This project reshaped the water flow across the fertile flood plain involving 300 farms. There was wide landholder participation and Departmental guidance. This work had to be done but was unable to be achieved by a Department alone. It was done well through Landcare. The coordinator was a local

landholder. This group and project continued on into important capacity building in its community members.

Lessons learned:

- This Group demonstrated that community empowerment through Landcare can dramatically increase participation rates for implementation of difficult but necessary land management issues. The land management changes were backed by regulation but peer pressure through community involvement largely averted the imposition of regulations.
- Capacity building of people assists in achieving natural resource outcomes.

The Taroom Shire Landcare Group

A Shire referendum was held resulting in a decision that all Taroom Shire landholders were Group members.

- Had close links with the Shire/LGA.
- Provided excellent extension to all Taroom Shire landholders.
- School visits by their coordinator.
- Research into vegetation management and regrowth retention.
- Research into soil biota, soil carbon, mineral balance, compost tea application on pastures.
- A major project based on mapping was implemented involving skills/knowledge development. Big focus on grazing management. The project generated funds for the Group.
- Standout coordinators employed by the Group, with an office and support materials.
- Group developed assets in knowledge, equipment and community support.

The Dalrymple Landcare Group

- Formed in 1988 as the first non-farming Landcare Group. Focus on grazing management and ground cover.
- Brought a big change in attitude to land management and to grazing management practices in the Burdekin Catchment area.
- Many projects and big landholder support in a critical Great Barrier Reef catchment.
- Its founding chairman last year won the Qld. Primary Producer award. After 21 years he is still involved.

Those are snapshots from the recent and not so recent past. Looking back there are thousands of projects and activities from hundreds of groups involving many thousands of people

But today Landcare is in decline and we might search for the reasons.

Lindsay Northrop thinks that a lot changed when the Minister Senator Hill made Government the hero, replacing the farmer and community member and micro-managed the Natural Heritage Trust. Lindsay recalls an earlier Commonwealth civil service when it was drilled into them that they were civil servants; servants of the public. He is distressed by the change to a civil service which he says now is focused on serving the Minister.

Lets' search further:

In the late 1990s it was decided that the next step was to be Catchment Management – to take Landcare environmental management approach to a wider landscape. It is perhaps significant that the number of Landcare Groups in Queensland peaked at 420 in the late 1990s right at the introduction of Catchment Management. The Queensland Landcare Council and the State Assessment Panel were disbanded. This transferred the funding decisions to Catchment Management Authorities which in many instances were not well linked with Landcare Groups. Landcare Group leaders were swept up in the rapid expansion of Catchment management and spent much of their volunteer time in regional meeting rather than at community level. The feeling of disempowerment spread among groups.

2010

Let's look at what is happening right now in two of those Groups:

Dalrymple Landcare Group now

- The Group is feeling disempowered by the move to Catchment Management. Coordinator issue – their funding was held up and the coordinator is now a helicopter pilot in the Gulf.
- The Great Barrier Reef regulatory requirements recently announced have resulted in a backlash against the Government program and against Landcare.
- Dalrymple Landcare people are claiming that thousands of hours of work over 22 years in changing attitudes and management have been trampled underfoot in this WWF-directed regulatory approach; that Government is missing the point with a broad brush approach when the science shows that 80% of the Burdekin sediment is coming from 10% of the catchment; that properties under 2000 ha. are exempt from regulation, an obvious flaw given the condition of peri-urban land.
- A very large meeting of landholders has just been held in Charters Towers and the tactics of Mahatma Gandhi are being considered as a response. It's a serious situation, a reversal of the previous partnership for improving land management that existed between Landcare Group landholders and Departmental officers.

Taroom Shire Landcare now

- Restricted coordinator role – no school visits.
- Had close links with the Shire/LGA. Shire amalgamation changes that.
- Xstrata buyout for coal mine has removed some key Group landholder members.
- Now struggling on limited funding but still doing 2 things: water quality monitoring, soil health research. Excellent work done – with no support from the Catchment, Xstrata, DERM.

The Queensland Government and many Catchment or Regional NRM Associations have lost the lesson of Landcare. The lesson of Landcare is that the empowerment of communities is an enlightened and efficient way to achieve beneficial natural resource management.

The best way to regenerate Landcare action is to re-establish the Landcare Groups. And the best way to re-establish Landcare Groups is to re-empower them.

The following actions are suggested:

Action 1

At the Commonwealth level the Australian Landcare Council would be modified with the aim of providing landcare leadership. It would be more representative of Landcare Groups and would advise on community responses to some of the big environmental challenges we face. The Chair would act as a national spokesperson for the landcare movement.

Action 2

A Commonwealth Government would require each Catchment Management Authority and Regional NRM Group, as a condition for receipt of funding, to show how it was supporting community landcare – and this to be verified by their Landcare Groups.

Action 3

A small amount of easily accessible funding for Landcare group action would be provided – say \$2,000 per year - to let them do what they see needs doing. This will be a catalyst for Landcare Group revival and renewed local action with a good return on investment expected.

Action 4

At the State level a Queensland Government would reinstate the Queensland Landcare Council and give it back the State Assessment role. Membership would ensure that the community members are in majority and Landcare is well represented.

Action 5

A Queensland Government would follow the example of the Brigalow-Jimbour Floodplains with local landholder/Landcare leadership for implementation of programs such as Great Barrier Reef action plans. Science provision would be combined with the community action and there would be regulatory backup.

Conclusion:

Landcare is a great concept; it's a social movement that is important for Australia.

There are excellent people involved across the country and across the State of Queensland, as represented here at this State Conference. Vital environmental work is being done by a host of dedicated volunteers.

But Landcare is in decline and there are urgent steps that could be taken to arrest that decline.

Rural and Regional Australia has fortuitously been provided high national awareness so the timing is right for Landcare to be revisited and renewed.

I have suggested some steps we could take for Landcare revival, there will be other steps found if we put our minds to it. And that revival, Landcare people, people of Australia, that is what we need to achieve..