



Landcare: working together

Robert Edgar, Frankston

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This Landcare Note describes landcare and its operation in Victoria.

Why landcare?

The effective treatment of many land degradation problems requires coordinated action across a number of farms. Participation in a landcare group encourages landholders to work together to solve land degradation problems within their local area. The program provides the basis of a working partnership between the community, Government, private industry and the Victorian Farmers Federation. It provides the vehicle for the distribution of funding for group projects under the National Heritage Trust and a number of State Government programs.

Support for community groups in the planning and implementation of land protection projects produces better and more cost effective results than where total control is kept by government.

Those closest to the action control the action.

Impact of land degradation

Land degradation has appeared in many forms across Victoria in the period since European settlement. Farming, forestry, mining, construction of roads and railways together with urban development have all contributed. Recreational activities as diverse as gardening and fox hunting have added to the problem through the introduction of plants and animals that have subsequently shown to be pests.

Land degradation causes a decline in biodiversity value and reduces agricultural production while adding to the maintenance costs of both private and public utilities. The impact on individuals and communities in both rural and urban areas reduces the wealth of the nation.

Reduced profitability of individual farming businesses impacts on the viability of towns and service industries adding to the social disruption of rural areas.

Forms of land degradation

Soil erosion caused by water or wind in places that do not have suitable vegetation cover is an obvious form of land degradation.

Damage from repeated cultivations for crop growing together with compaction caused by tractors and heavy

machinery make the soil less suitable for the growth of plants and increase the amount of water that runs from the paddock. The extra flow of water causes more erosion and the soil particles and nutrients that are lost from the eroded paddock reduce water quality in local streams. The water becomes turbid and the additional nutrients promote the growth of toxic algae.

Increased run off plus grazing and tramping of stream banks by livestock and the removal of the native vegetation has increased the rate of stream bank erosion reducing the value of the stream and further adding to the level of nutrients in the water. Poor water quality leads to a reduction in the biodiversity value of the streams.

Some cropping systems have caused an increase in the natural level of soil acidity resulting in poor growth of crops and pastures and to significant amounts of nitrate being leached from the soil into the ground water and streams further increasing the risk of algal blooms.

In some parts of the State the clearing of deep-rooted native vegetation has allowed additional amounts of water to soak through the soil into the water table. The subsequent rise in the level of the water table has brought dissolved salt to the surface. The salt concentration increases as the water evaporates leaving large areas of salt affected land. Salinity is also a problem in irrigation areas where a combination of over watering and poor drainage has caused the water tables to rise towards the surface.

Introduced weeds, by competing with crops and pastures for moisture and nutrients, have had a major impact on agricultural production. Weeds have also invaded bushland reducing the conservation value and threatening the survival of many native species.

Rabbits have devastating effects on the environment. They can strip the ground of vegetation leaving it susceptible to wind and water damage. Their warrens can initiate erosion. Rabbits also compete with livestock and native animals for feed.

What is landcare?

Landcare is about people actively and collectively caring for the land. It makes sense to work together to tackle land degradation problems when there is usually more than one farm involved. Weed seeds blow across property boundaries and erosion gullies cut through fences. Landcare groups encourage neighbours to work together to overcome common problems.

Victoria has a long history of groups working together. It is outlined in Landcare Note LC0027 *Landcare: development in Victoria*.

Experience has shown that the group approach achieves better results than individuals working alone. Sharing of information with other group members leads to an improved understanding of both problems and solutions. Groups also have more access to a wider range of advice and financial support than is available to the individual.

Regular community landcare conferences are held in regional areas to provide opportunities for groups and members to learn from each other. Community conferences have also contributed to developing a sense of identity for the landcare movement.

Landcare groups have proved to be an effective means of integrating new farmers, including hobby farmers, into the local community. They have also provided a valuable social outlet where sporting clubs, schools and churches have closed as the population declined.

Real solutions to a land degradation problem need to be both profitable and sustainable. Farmers need to have profitable businesses if they are to adopt environmentally sound farming practices. Adequate income from the land is needed to ensure that production is maintained. For success landcare must combine production and conservation objectives.

Improved productivity and amenity values are now apparent in many areas where groups have been working for some time. The public recognition of the success of landcare encourages greater participation in groups and provides a boost in community pride and sense of achievement.

Supporting landcare groups

With more than 900 active landcare groups in Victoria there is no such thing as a typical group. Groups vary in size, focus, formality, public profile, level of activity, organisational structure and amount of funding that they seek.

Government agencies and Catchment Management Authorities play a role in fostering the enthusiasms of active groups but also work to directly encourage sound land management practices in all in those parts of the State with land degradation problems.

Landcare in action

Local control of projects is a feature of the landcare program. Successful groups work closely with government and commercial service providers but retain their independence. Cohesion is enhanced where groups are based on natural social boundaries and members come together to work on shared land management problems. The strong support of the Victorian Farmers Federation has been critical for the credibility of landcare in the Farming community.

Autonomy comes at a cost and many larger groups have become reliant on community based coordinators. Coordinators are funded through the National Heritage

Trust and various State government programs. They provide much of the communication within the group and play a key role in preparing submissions and reports to funding bodies. Training programs are provided to help group coordinators develop their important role in maintaining and strengthening their group. In some cases coordinators are employed to work with a network of groups. This enables smaller groups to have the benefit of a coordinator and further enhances communication between groups.

Public land, National Parks, forests and reserves, covers about 40% of Victoria. Where land degradation problems overlap the public land / private land boundary, landcare groups provide an opportunity for private and public land managers to work together to tackle problems. This activity is supported by the "Good Neighbour program" through which Government agencies provide funding to protect private land from weed and pest invasions from adjoining public land.

Landcare groups provide an important interface for adapting research projects. Many groups have cooperated with scientists in fieldwork for the biological control of weeds. This has enhanced the research work, improved local understanding of the problem while reducing the time taken for the release of large numbers of insects for weed control.

Landcare and the urban community

Landcare seeks to encourage whole communities to care for their land. This includes municipalities, conservation groups, schools and interested individuals. There are more than 200 'Friend of...' groups in the Melbourne area. These groups demonstrate a strong commitment to managing areas of public land in their neighbourhood. Many groups formed years before the landcare program was established. Although they do not use the generic landcare name, these voluntary groups are similar in many ways to landcare groups in rural areas. They play an essential role both in preventing further degradation of local bushland and in restoring its recreational and biodiversity values.

Landcare Australia has conducted a number of television campaigns aimed at urban audiences to raise the awareness of landcare in the general community. Landcare Australia, together with a number of major sponsors, also promotes the landcare Awards on a biennial basis. The awards are an important way of giving recognition to the work done by farmers and recognise the significant contributions made by individuals and groups to the landcare movement.

'Saltwatch' and 'Waterwatch' are two community based water-monitoring programs that have played a major role in involving young people and their families in land management activities.

Schools programs including 'Landcare for Kids' have also played a major role in maintaining community support. These programs have been successful in both rural and urban schools and communities.

Landcare programs organised by schools and community groups provide a great framework for learning. Junior

Landcare enables children to become involved with their local landcare group and work on a range of environmental projects. Through junior landcare, young people have an opportunity to contribute to a range of environmental projects. Junior Landcare also encourages young people to develop a sense of responsibility to the land and other natural resources.

Some of the tasks undertaken by Junior Landcare groups include nest box building, track making/landscaping, weeding, water monitoring, plant and animal surveys, educational activities such as field trips or site visits

They also prepare displays and demonstrations to raise awareness of landcare in their local area. A number of exchange programs between urban and rural schools have been conducted. These programs seek to improve the understanding of rural issues in urban areas.

Landcare Australia encourages the participation of Melbourne people in tree planting programs in rural areas. Most recently near Bendigo as part of the tree-planting program associated with the Sydney Olympics 2000.

Challenge for landcare groups

Many farming industries are currently faced with difficult economic conditions. Prices for major commodities are depressed and access to some traditional international markets is under constant challenge. As a consequence many landholders have limited time or financial resources to take part in community activities as off-farm work becomes an important supplement to family income. Although landcare has a clear focus on financially sound solutions, tight economic conditions usually limit the capacity to change management practices or to adopt new ideas.

'Burn out' of group members has been mentioned in a number of recent reports on the landcare program. Key members of some groups have become frustrated and disillusioned with the amount of work, lack of responsiveness of some group members and with the reporting requirements of Government funding programs. This is partly a reflection of the current difficult economic conditions in rural Australia, but is also related to the group management skills of the members. Training programs are continually required to further develop the capacity of leaders to delegate tasks and responsibilities, and to support the preparation of funding applications. Rotating leadership and administrative positions within the group is a good way of reducing the potential for 'burn out'.

Groups should set realistic and achievable goals. Tensions develop when the group falls short of ambitious goals that were set when the group first formed. Targets may not be met because of seasonal conditions, changed financial or personal circumstance, or they may have been set too high in the first place.

The availability of sound technical advice is an issue that has been raised by many groups. Changes to the way Government extension services are now provided have not been fully understood and do not meet the expectations many group members. Landcare groups and Government extension services should resolve the challenge of developing and maintaining an effective relationship to enable effective exchange of information. The property management planning program or 'Farm\$mart' provides a good basis for developing this relationship.

Rural Victoria is currently facing severe economic, environmental and social challenges. Landcare is a proven contributor to addressing many of these challenges. Further nurturing will be rewarded.

Further Information

See Landcare Notes

LC0027: *Landcare: development in Victoria*

LC0026: *Landcare: reading list*

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