

Opening Speech by Rob Dulhunty, Chair, Landcare NSW

Local Landcare Coordinator Initiative

Induction and Training Event

21-23 March 2016, Stockton Beach

The Resurgence of Landcare

Good morning. Welcome to this gathering of Landcarers from across the State.

I begin by acknowledging the Worimi people, traditional owners of the land upon which we meet. I thank them sincerely for their welcome.

I also extend my thanks to John Hughson and Susan Hooke, representing Landcare and Local Land Services from the Hunter region.

I would like to acknowledge a number of people:

- Our Minister, the Honourable Niall Blair, who has sent us a message of support,
- My Co-Chair on the Joint Management Committee responsible for this program, Alex Anthony from Local Land Services – Landcare could not ask for a better partner,
- Program leaders Sonia Williams from Landcare NSW and Kate Andrews from Local Land Services – two of Australia’s most experienced practitioners in natural resource management,
- My fellow Councillors from Landcare NSW,
- Regional Landcare Facilitators, and
- Our many friends and colleagues from Local Land Services.

Most importantly, I acknowledge you – Local Coordinators and representatives of host organisations.

Thank you for applying to be part of this program. We look forward travelling down this road together over the next three years.

The theme for my short address this morning is The Resurgence of Landcare.

In a short time we’ve gone from a feeling of almost despair in the Landcare community to one of optimism.

Just two years ago, morale was low, funds had dried up, some organisations were contemplating shutting their doors.

Today we have a network of 66 part-time coordinators across the State, supported by a Community of Practice and a reinvigorated partnership between Landcare and Local Land Services.

We’re working with a new Government and a new Landcare policy that includes a commitment to developing a sustainable funding source so Landcare is viable into the future.

In thinking about the resurgence of Landcare, I would like to pose three questions...

What is this period of Landcare we find ourselves in?

How did we arrive at this point?

How do we capitalise on this moment in time?

When Landcare began 27 years ago there were five crucial elements:

- We had a visible problem in the form of dust storms in Melbourne, salinity, soil erosion and loss of vegetation across the country.
- We had farmers and local citizens who designed a response and called it Landcare.
- We had advocacy by the leaders of Australia's farmers and conservationists in an unlikely but powerful coalition.
- We had agreement by political leaders and all three tiers of government to invest in a coordinated national program.
- Most importantly, we had communities who formed groups and organised on ground action.

Sadly, some of our Landcare founders are no longer with us.

Former Victorian Premier, Joan Kirner, and former head of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Phillip Toyne, died in 2014.

Rick Farley, at the helm of the National Farmers Federation when Landcare began, died in 2006.

I think it's important we acknowledge their contribution – and that of many others who had the vision and tenacity to get Landcare off the ground in those early years.

Since the initial Decade of Landcare, we've seen changes in government policy. We've seen funding reductions. We've watched Ministers come and Ministers go. We've given evidence at parliamentary inquiries. Provided input to countless consultations. Watched public servants change institutional arrangements time and time again. And we've seen change in our own organisations, too.

Australia's first Landcare Facilitator, Andrew Campbell, has commented that each new era of government policy started from scratch instead of building on what was there before. We are pleased to see this current program in NSW being managed and delivered via a partnership between the Government and the Landcare community.

But despite the changes and upheaval in our operating environment, Landcare's core concepts and values haven't changed.

Our strength still lies in the fact that we're a grassroots, community movement – we're about local people doing work on the ground on local problems and we're about changing hearts and minds.

The idea of Landcare is as relevant today as it was when those Victorian farmers looked across their bare paddocks and got together to figure out what they could do to change their practices and protect the natural resource base.

So what is this current period we find ourselves in?

We are on the cusp of a new era.

For years the message I conveyed every time I met a politician was: "We need more local Landcare Coordinators."

- Now, we've got 66 of you across the State ready to unleash your skill, passion and enthusiasm.

We asked the Government to publicly recognise the value of Landcare and the contribution of volunteers.

- They've done that – we have a hugely supportive Minister, Niall Blair, and a great advocate in the Deputy Premier, Troy Grant. We have strong support from all political parties including Labor and the Greens. Politicians from all parties have shown their commitment by signing up to the Parliamentary Friends of Landcare which has over 30 members.

We said Landcare couldn't operate without a positive relationship with Local Land Services.

- That relationship exists at the State level and it's now a matter of doing the work to ensure it functions consistently across the regions.

We said for Landcare to succeed, we needed a voice in Macquarie Street and the high echelons of the NSW public service.

- We've got that in the Joint Management Committee responsible for delivering the Government's Landcare policy and in your peak body, the organisation I chair, Landcare NSW.

Many of these positive elements were present during Landcare's heyday.

And to add to that, the task is as big as ever.

With population growth, development, climate change and a fragile natural environment, we have an ever growing list of problems and challenges that can only be addressed by a skilled, confident and willing community.

So...my analysis is...the conditions are right for this resurgence of Landcare.

The question is how do we capitalise on this moment in time? How do we ride this wave so that we've done the work necessary while this window is open to secure the future of Landcare in NSW?

Let's remind ourselves of the parameters of this particular program.

The NSW Government has made a \$15m commitment over four years.

The Budget papers prepared by NSW Treasury put it plainly.

The funding commenced in July 2015 and concludes in June 2019.

The Government's policy is to use this period of the next three years to secure the viability of Landcare by developing a model for a sustainable, diversified funding.

The imperative is to think now about how we will ensure this program continues beyond 2019.

This is our problem to solve as much as it is the Government's.

As Local Coordinators and Landcare organisations, the most powerful thing you can do is do a really fantastic job.

You all have the opportunity to make a difference – not just in your local communities but in building the foundations so we still have a program in three years' time.

Landcare started with a group of farmers talking over the fence and sitting down together to decide how to respond to issues that were affecting their livelihoods, their local environment, their families and communities.

It spread across the nation with the backing of governments.

Over the years, we got used this government funding stream.

While I firmly believe we will always rely on some form of government funding, I believe it's time for us to evolve as a movement – and look at how we can contribute to our own longevity.

Like any social movement, or any sector, we need to move with the times.

This period in Landcare's history is a time to build up our networks and deliver results for our communities.

The resurgence of Landcare will enable us to put the building blocks in place for Landcare into the future.

With this in mind here is what I think we need to do.

We need to retain the values upon which Landcare was built in the first place.

Our genesis was a meeting of the minds of farmers and conservationists. That remains a core strength.

We need to be really good at what we do.

That means best practice, exemplary governance and management.

We need to measure.

We must be able to demonstrate our impact with hard data, facts and stories.

We need to educate, communicate, promote and advocate.

Decision-makers, leaders, the media, and the community needs to understand who we are, what we do and the results we are achieving.

We need to build partnerships and alliances

This includes all levels of government, business, community, philanthropy and industry.

We need a new mindset of self-sufficiency, innovation and confidence

Within our networks we have smart people, great skills, experience, financial resources and, more importantly, passion. We need to draw on that to secure our future.

Finally, we need legitimacy and influence as a voice for the Landcare movement

It's through pulling together and through membership of peak bodies such as Landcare NSW that we can strengthen our voice.

Conclusion

If Governments today tried to establish a national network of skilled and motivated volunteers to work on environmental and sustainable agriculture issues at the community level, imagine what this would entail.

Imagine what a massive and costly task this would be....

Well, they don't have to.

This network exists and it's called Landcare.

Governments have poured millions of dollars into it. Farmers, professionals and local people have devoted years of their lives to it. We have our own organisations, our institutions, our ways of doing things.

After a period of flagging fortunes, I think this new Landcare program can be the catalyst for a resurgence of Landcare in NSW.

It's up to us to make it happen – all of us, Landcare NSW, Local Land Services, Local Coordinators, host organisations and of course our 60,000 strong Landcare movement.

Enjoy the Conference and I look forward to talking with you over the next three days.