

Speech to Landcare Adventure

Tamworth

27 May 2015

Good morning. Thank you Steph Cameron for your introductory comments. Steph is one of our 23 Councillors at Landcare NSW, and a new and very valuable member of our executive. We are very appreciative of the skill she brings to our organisation and also, the leadership she brings to this region.

I am constantly humbled by the capacity of the individuals who make up our Council at LNSW; it's an honour and a privilege to work with these wonderful individuals, and to have access to the skills and knowledge that all my colleagues bring to LNSW.

What is extraordinary is they are happy to give their time, their advice, their knowledge for free. Why do they do this?..... because they believe in Landcare.

I acknowledge Conrad Bolton, chair of the Local Land Services, and the many hard-working staff here from Local Land Services.

Most importantly, I acknowledge all those Landcarers who have set aside valuable time to come to this event to gather information, make connections and – most importantly – to learn.

It's good to be back in the North West – amongst many old friends, fellow farmers, fellow Landcarers and colleagues.

I would like to begin my address by recognising the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I thank Neville Sampson for his welcome to country and pay my respects to his elders, past and present.

It is important we properly acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land. Aboriginal people have been here for 60,000 years or more. In my view....they were the original Landcarers. So, there is much we can learn from them and much Landcare can offer in return.

Looking at the program, you have a very informative, educational and fun couple of days ahead of you.

Personally I think the highlight will be the rope swing and the rock climbing! As farmers, and as landcarers, I think there's plenty of times that we've been "on the ropes" so at least we'll be used to it!

The three themes of the Landcare Adventure program are: Healthy Farms; Healthy Soils; Healthy People.

These are really big, really important topics that are directly relevant to the lives and work of the people in this region and to this landscape that sustains us. I'm looking forward to attending the sessions and to participating in the discussion.

But I'd like to add another theme! And it's the one I would like to explore in my presentation.

In order to have Healthy Farms, Healthy Soils and Healthy People, I would argue that we need to have a Healthy Landcare community.

Because, what we have seen after 25 years of Landcare in Australia, is that Landcare works.

We know that from our own experience, and we know because our experience is supported by research.

This research is very clear.....there is a very strong evidence base that demonstrates the benefits of a healthy Landcare community. Although I do agree we need to do more research that continues to reaffirm this to the policy makers.

This conference itself is a microcosm of how Landcare operates.

There are opportunities to listen to, and learn from, the experts; they may be researchers and scientists, or they may be your neighbours.

You may be in this room listening to a formal address or you may be on site seeing the results for yourselves.

Discussion is not only about technical matters of agricultural production...it's also about our wellbeing as individuals and as communities.

There is time in the program to build connections between people, and to formally recognise outstanding individual contributions through the Landcare awards.

This is what Landcare is all about and it's why as Landcarers, we have stuck with Landcare and why the Landcare model has survived.

I have just returned from a meeting of the National Landcare Network in Perth – this is the peak body for community Landcare.

And what I heard around that table is that Landcarers in all states and territories are getting together to protect and grow the Landcare movement.

There is now a representative organisation in each jurisdiction.

There is growing recognition of the need for Landcare to speak up for the community in this new era of regional bodies.

In NSW we have around 60,000 Landcare volunteers. Collectively we make a massive contribution to the Australian economy.

In the Sydney region alone there are more than 900 groups. Think of the possibilities if we had even half this many groups in the North West!

No matter what these groups look like...whether they may be farming systems groups, they may be bushcare, coastcare, dunecare or friends of the local creek but they are all working within the Landcare model.

Almost every suburb and town in NSW has a Landcare group. They're not only working on the land, they are part of the social fabric of their communities.

Landcare has become a permanent feature in our communities and landscapes.

Let's not forget Landcare's origins. It began with a group of farmers talking about problems on their land and collectively devising and implementing a solution.

There was a meeting of the minds between the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Farmers Federation who realised this was a great idea that met their shared goals and they took a proposal to the Federal Government.

All Governments – federal, state, territory and local – got behind the idea and Landcare turned into a national program.

At its heart the Landcare model never changed. It just got better – with more skill, more knowledge, better ways of doing things, more innovation – and much leveraging of additional in kind and financial support.

Did you know Landcare has been replicated in more than 25 countries? And that this number is increasing?

I believe Landcare will continue to grow both in Australia and overseas – because it is fundamentally a good idea that provides a model to deal with major issues facing our environment and society.

The global population is growing...there are more people to house, greater demands for energy, more people to feed and they are seeking a greater variety of food.

The planet's lands, waters, soils, plant and animal life are under pressure. On top of that we must now add the consequences of climate change.

These are big challenges.

Governments do not have enough money or enough resources to tackle these issues on their own...

...and, they cannot achieve change without the cooperation of the private landholders who are responsible for more than 70 percent of the land mass in NSW.

Policies, laws, regulations and government services and programs are necessary and have their place.

However they are not sufficient to deal with the scale of the issues.

The only way to meet these challenges is to provide and support a model that enables the community to take responsibility.

Governments win and lose office. Departmental structures change. Funding rises and falls. But the community stays...our structures, if we build and nurture them, remain. Landcare has endured and is here to stay, ready to partner with whichever government is in power, whichever bureaucratic structures are in place.

My own involvement in Landcare started over 25 years ago. I was 24 years old and had just returned to the family property. When I asked my father what he thought I should direct my efforts toward, he said "this Landcare thing sounds interesting....".

It was 1989 and the Decade of Landcare was just beginning.

So, I got involved, and on our property “doing Landcare” meant restoring biodiversity, improving water quality, weed and feral animal control, property and sub-catchment planning. All really good stuff!....

So for me that’s where it all started.

We formed a local group, the Furracabad Landcare Group, which I chaired. Then later I became chairman of GLENRAC, and then New England and North West Landcare network Chair and in 2007 I helped establish the process that led to the birth of the State organisation of Landcare NSW, the organisation I now chair.

I now return to my theme – the need for a Healthy Landcare Movement.

This has been the focus of Landcare NSW since our formation.

The fact is that no volunteer movement operates without structures and support – look at the rural fire service, the state emergency service, surf life saving...volunteers will get involved but they need a model to work within, they need organisations, they need training, support, communications, help to attract and maintain volunteers, assistance with issues like insurance.

They also need recognition from the government and the community that the work they do is of value.

Since our formation Landcare NSW has been talking to Landcarers about what they need to carry out their activities.

The key message has been the need for support – especially local coordinators.

Last year we drew upon this information to develop a proposal for a new Landcare Support Program.

Our proposal was for the State Government to renew the partnership with Landcare by funding local coordinators, funding more of these wonderful local people...the backbone of the Landcare movement.

Along with the coordinators we also secured funding for a central team including an Aboriginal initiative and, really importantly, a commitment to work with us to develop a sustainable long term funding source for Landcare people and support.

We costed this at \$7.5m a year and we clarified this was in addition to current support provided by various state and federal agencies.

The Landcare community designed this program and the Landcare community then took it to all political parties prior to the 2015 election.

All parties released policies in support of Landcare.

The Coalition Government committed \$15m in new funding for Landcare support – not for on ground projects, but for people.

This is funding to build the capacity of the community to participate in Landcare. It must be said that the amount of \$15m is half what we costed the program...so we will need to look at how to build on that funding base.

Funding is a crucial part of the commitment but it's not everything.

Just as important is that the Government formally expressed its support for Landcare and our role in natural resource management.

LNSW would love to claim credit for this result but the credit goes to the Landcare community.

While Landcare NSW coordinated the effort, it was your hard work at the local level that made the difference.

When I visited the Deputy Premier and other Ministers in Macquarie Street, they already knew about Landcare because of the work Landcarers had done in talking to their Local Member and other community leaders.

By working together at the local level Landcarers made their voices heard. And from the feedback I have received from members of our Council at Landcare NSW this was a very empowering experience for Landcarers.

So this was a great result – all credit to the Landcare community – and to the Government. If we can get the design of the new program right and put in place a sustainable long term funding source, this will be an amazing legacy.

So, this policy commitment gives us the opportunity to improve the health of the Landcare movement.

Despite the fundamental strength of Landcare that I have talked about today, attention to the health of the movement is urgently needed.

The changes that have occurred over the past 10 years have made it increasingly difficult for Landcare to operate.

Whereas in the first period of Landcare the community drove activity to restore and protect natural resources, we now have the regional model of NRM organisations controlling the funds...both institutions have to work to find complementary roles.

We need to reset the balance so the volunteers and landholders are able to get on with the job at the local level.

This new policy gives us a chance to get these settings right. Landcare NSW initiated a process through the Minister's office coordinated by the Natural Resources Commission to design the new support program.

We have invited Local Land Services, Department of Primary Industries and Office of Environment and Heritage to participate. All these agencies have a big stake in a healthy Landcare movement.

But the party with the most at stake is the grassroots community Landcare movement. The model that is developed must have their endorsement as they are the people who need to make it work.

We are committed to working through this process and representing Landcare's views.

If we get the settings right and build a Healthy Landcare community, the benefits for agricultural production, environmental conservation and building stronger communities will follow.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by saying that I am optimistic about the future.

Australians have a culture of rolling up our sleeves and volunteering our time and skills.

Landcare is part of that ethos.

Because of the efforts of local people getting involved, we have restored huge areas of land.

But the greatest thing Landcare has done is change the way we think and the way we do things.

It changes hearts and minds.

Farmers are responsible for most of the land...and in my experience 99 percent of them want to look after their land. It's in their own interests as it leads to a better livelihood and enables them to pass on the property to their children in good shape.

But they need knowledge and information.

The best way to get that knowledge is by working together with trusted friends, neighbours and colleagues.

Despite being 25 years old, Landcare is a relatively young movement.

The message I get from my Council – 23 people who represent Landcare from all over the state – is that they want to see Landcare grow and thrive for the next 100 years and beyond.

If we are going to achieve that vision, we need to attend closely to the health of the Landcare movement now.

That means putting the right structures in place now – so that we endure into the future.

I look forward to participating over the next two days and wish you all an excellent conference.

Thank you.