

CARING FOR LAND AND PEOPLE

A History of Landcare NSW

2007 - 2019



Landcare
New South Wales

VIRGINIA MACLEOD



About the Author

Virginia Macleod is a professional historian who has two decades' experience writing local, regional and thematic social history. Her work as a local historian has allowed her to work closely with the community, gathering information, images and interviews to elicit their history throughout Sydney and rural NSW.

Her works include communicating history through writing, talks, guided historical walks, curating exhibitions, outdoor display panels and plaques, and creating websites.

Cover image: Since 1999, Bushcare volunteers from North Sydney Council have travelled five hours to Boorowa in south-west New South Wales to spend three days assisting landholders with revegetation projects as part of the 'Building Bridges to Boorowa' program. The cover image shows volunteers planting in 2015 at "Murloona".

Title: Caring for land and people – a history of Landcare NSW 2007-2019

ISBN: 978-0-646-80320-3

Published by Landcare NSW Inc, June 2019

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This publication (and any material sourced from it) should be attributed as:

Macleod, Virginia, 2019. Caring for Land and People: *A history of Landcare NSW 2007 - 2019*, Landcare NSW

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Acknowledgements: This project is supported by the Create NSW Cultural Grants Program, a devolved funding program administered by the Royal Australian Historical Society on behalf of the NSW Government.





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Foreword

In 2017, reflecting on the foundations of our organisation in 2007, we recognised Landcare NSW had come a long way in a decade and our story should be preserved. We hoped the documentation of our history might explain to future generations the culture and values of the founders of Landcare NSW. A professional historian, Virginia Macleod, was engaged to undertake research and with input from staff and volunteers of Landcare NSW she has produced this excellent record. I would like to thank Virginia for her dedication to the project. I also extend my sincere appreciation to those who were interviewed and other individuals who contributed to this project, particularly Landcare NSW staff members Jodie Lovell, Leigh McLaughlin and Sonia Williams.

Landcare NSW gratefully acknowledges the support of a NSW Cultural Grant from the Create NSW funding program 2018, administered by the Royal Australian Historical Society on behalf of the NSW Government. It has allowed for five recorded interviews and transcripts to be lodged in the State Library of NSW oral history collection, seminal documents to be gathered together and archived, and this written history to be made available on the Landcare NSW website.

We now have on record the observations and stories of a number of people involved in the formative years of Landcare NSW. It is my hope this history will inspire others involved in the NSW Landcare community to come forward to share their views and add to the historical record. As more material is uncovered, I envisage we will be able to fill in gaps and add to the richness of our story.

In the year we release this history, 2019, it is 30 years since the late Bob Hawke announced the 'Decade of Landcare' during his tenure as Prime Minister of Australia. It was a moment in time that inspired the formation of thousands of community groups across the nation who to this day are working to change the management of the environment and our natural resources. Despite the massive success of Landcare, the environmental challenges we face on every level remain daunting and the need for Landcare is stronger than ever. I hope this history inspires a new generation to get behind Landcare and work together to undertake the transformational change needed to protect and restore the natural environment which sustains us.



Dr Adrian Zammit

Chief Executive Officer, Landcare NSW

June 2019

List of Landcare NSW Executive Management Committee and Office Bearers 2007 – 2019

2007 First Landcare NSW Committee: Present at the inaugural meeting, chaired by Chris Scott on 27 November 2007 were: Les Roberts, Robert Dulhunty, John Hughson, Rod Parker-Wright, Fergus Job, Brian Dodd, Malcolm Whan, Neville Sloss, Marion Benjamin, Mandi Stevenson, David Walker. Chris Scott and David Walker acted as 'interim co-convenors' until 5 May 2008 when the first committee of management was elected (see 2008).

2008 Executive Management Committee: David Walker, Chair; Mandi Stevenson, Deputy Chair; Marion Benjamin, Secretary; John Hughson, Treasurer.

2009 Executive Management Committee: David Walker, Chair; Mandi Stevenson, Deputy Chair; Marion Benjamin, Secretary; Fergus Job, Minutes Secretary; John Hughson, Treasurer.

2010 Executive Management Committee: David Walker, Chair; Mandi Stevenson, Deputy Chair; Marion Benjamin, Secretary; Marlene Pennings, Treasurer.

2011 Executive Management Committee: Mandi Stevenson, Chair; David Walker, Co-Deputy Chair; John Dalton, Co-Deputy Chair; John Hughson, Secretary; Chris Cumming, Assistant Secretary; Stuart Mosely, Membership Secretary; Marlene Pennings, Treasurer.

2012 Executive Management Committee: Mandi Stevenson, Chair; David Walker, Deputy Chair; Robert Dulhunty, Deputy Chair; Chris Cumming, Secretary; Sonia Williams, Treasurer.

2013 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; Mandi Stevenson, Deputy Chair; Chris Cumming, Secretary; Christopher Scott, Treasurer; and committee members; David Walker, Pip Job, Margot Jolly, Glenys Patulney.

2014 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; David Walker, Deputy Chair; Christopher Scott, Treasurer; Pip Job, Secretary; and committee members; Keith Hyde, Steph Cameron, Glenys Patulny, Robert Jarman, John Hughson.

2015 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; David Walker, Deputy Chair; Christopher Scott, Treasurer; Stephanie Cameron, Secretary; and committee members; Keith Hyde, John Hughson, Robert Jarman, Beverley Debrincat.

2016 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; Stephanie Cameron, Deputy Chair; Christopher Scott, Treasurer; Robert Jarman, Secretary; and committee members; Beverley Debrincat, John Hughson, Keith Hyde, Dale Stringer.

2017 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; Stephanie Cameron, Deputy Chair; Christopher Scott, Treasurer; Robert Jarman, Secretary; and committee members; Beverley Debrincat, John Hughson, Keith Hyde, Dale Stringer.

2018 Executive Management Committee: Robert Dulhunty, Chair; Stephanie Cameron, Deputy Chair; Adrian Zammit, Chief Executive Officer; Hunter White, Treasurer; Robert Jarman, Secretary; and committee members; Beverley Debrincat, Keith Hyde, Stuart Mosely, Martin Royds.

2019 Executive Management Committee: Stephanie Cameron, Chair; Keith Hyde, Deputy Chair; Adrian Zammit, Chief Executive Officer; Hunter White, Treasurer; Stuart Mosely, Secretary; and committee members; Beverley Debrincat, Margaret Applebee, Leslie Pearson, Christopher Post.

Profile of Interviewees and Founders

Rob Dulhanty has been a dedicated member of the Landcare movement since 1989 at all levels – local, regional and national. He was a founding member of Landcare NSW in 2007 when he was appointed Deputy Chair and served as Landcare NSW Chair from 2012 – 2018. His leadership roles include GLENRAC (Glen Innes) and New England-North West Landcare Network Chairs. He also served on the board of the National Landcare Network. In December 2015 Rob was appointed to the Board of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation.

John Hughson has been involved with Landcare for over 25 years. He has worked to develop Landcare at local, district and regional levels, contributing a legacy of strong, well-established groups. After 25 years of Landcaring and 14 years in Landcare support roles with Lake Macquarie City Council, John is now self-employed, providing Landcare facilitation and program management for the Hunter Region Landcare Network and teaching Conservation and Land Management. A foundation member of Landcare NSW, representing Lake Macquarie's Landcare community, John's roles have included: Chair of the Hunter Region Landcare Network, Chair of the Hunter's Regional Landcare Facilitator Steering Committee, and member of the Hunter's Great Eastern Ranges team. Convenor of the first Landcare gathering at Myuna Bay, John represented the Hunter region at the state level on the Council of Landcare NSW for over a decade and served on its Executive Committee.

Bill Pigott is an active Landcarer in Berry NSW and Chair of Berry Landcare. His many roles include: coordinator for a local Bushcare site, member of the local Catchment Management Authority and local Council working groups and committees. Bill represented South East Landcare at state level on the Council of Landcare NSW. Bill previously worked for the World Health Organisation in Nepal, Cambodia and at its Geneva headquarters.

Chris Scott is one of the founders of Landcare NSW. Chris was the Chairman of the NSW Landcare Committee and co-convenor of the new formed Landcare NSW in 2007. He has been involved with Landcare for the past 20 years, contributing to the development of the movement at the local, regional, state and national levels. Chris' leadership roles include Chair of Wherrol Flat and Caparra Landcare, Chair of Manning Landcare since 2003 and Chair of the NSW Landcare Committee from 2003 to 2010. Chris represents the Mid Coast to Tops region at a state level on the Council of Landcare NSW and served on the Executive Committee.

Mandi Stevenson has been a grazier for 30 years, and has been involved in Landcare since the early 1990s, including three years as a Coordinator. A founder of Landcare NSW, she was Landcare NSW Chair from 2010 – 2012 and Deputy Chair, National Landcare Network delegate and NSW representative on the Landcare Australia Limited advisory board. Mandi was a member of South-East Landcare, President of Panboola Wetlands Committee and a board member of the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority.

David Walker has been instrumental in the genesis and growth of representative Landcare, both in NSW and nationally. He was the foundation Chair of Landcare NSW from 2007, and canvassed the need for, and drove the formation of, a national representative Landcare organisation, becoming the Foundation Chair of the National Landcare Network in 2009.

Sonia Williams' lengthy experience with Landcare began as a voluntary project officer for the Harnham Landcare group. Since then her roles have included Coordinator and Executive Officer with Southern New England Landcare, Project Manager with New England North West Landcare, State Landcare Coordinator, State Landcare Facilitator and General Manager of Landcare NSW. A career highlight had been the role played in successfully lobbying for and then designing the NSW State Government funded Local Landcare Coordinator Initiative launched in 2015, for which Sonia was the State Landcare Coordinator from 2015 to 2018.

Karen Zirkler has a passion for Landcare and its ethic, and loves facilitating groups and communities to identify and work towards achieving their sustainability goals. She has worked as a Landcare Coordinator for over 15 years at Southern New England Landcare and has been the Executive Officer since 2015.

Introduction

This historical record is written in the 12th year of Landcare NSW but refers to the 30 years of the emergence of Landcare in Australia. In order to understand the evolution of Landcare NSW, and in particular its operating and communication structure and the pitfalls and hurdles in achieving the Landcare model, the author spoke with five current and former leaders in the Landcare movement: Robert Dulhunty, David Walker, Sonia Williams, Karen Zirkler and Bill Pigott. They agreed to record their individual local Landcare experiences, and in particular their involvement with the formation of Landcare NSW and its first decade.

There are about 3000 Landcare groups across New South Wales, with diverse purposes, structures and members. Landcare's growth has been organic: there is no formal route to becoming a Landcare group; groups arise from an idea or a need, but what links them is a common purpose and belief about how that need is best achieved. The entity Landcare NSW strives to foster this flexibility and spontaneity by facilitating its members in an increasingly regulated and bureaucratic society and strengthening their resolve to achieve their part in the complex patchwork of caring for the NSW environment.

On any given day throughout NSW people will be practising Landcare. A group of people in Berry may be working to prevent weeds spreading around the hospital grounds; in New England farmers whose properties lie along a creek may be discussing how to prevent erosion and keep the water clean; in Far West NSW, owners of vast tracts of land make a decision to change farming practice to improve the environment and consequently their own productivity; at Bluey's Beach on the mid-NSW coast, volunteers remove plants introduced after mining 50 years ago and stabilise the dunes by planting native stock; residents in Wahroonga in Sydney spend a day stabilising the banks of an urban creek with 32 species, removing weed and sediment as they go; volunteers gather seed for propagation on a bush reserve and pause for morning tea to exchange tips; a mother and son create a place to compost in their garden, cutting down an old garbage bin. What binds these people together?

How it all began

As Tom Healy, Board member of the Ian Potter Foundation, said in 2016:

*'A visionary grant [in 1982] focused on supporting and working with a group of farmers in the Western District of Victoria to achieve sustainable farm management practices. The Potter Farmland Plan ultimately contributed to the creation of Australia's Landcare movement.'*¹

The beginning of the Landcare movement is attributed by several people to the Potter Farms, but in fact, as is often the case, these 15 sustainable farms were a practical manifestation of a change of attitude within parts of government, among some farmers and conservationists, as well as benefactors.

Previously both government and farmers had focused on soil conservation but now it was appreciated that to improve and sustain productivity of 'fibre and food', the land and all its elements, not just soil, but also water and vegetation conservation, cultivation methods, and tree planting had to be acted on together. Two women in Victoria, the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Land, Joan Kirner, and Heather Mitchell, President of the Farmers' Federation, agreed on a community-based program, which was listed under the name LandCare in 1986.²

In Victoria the Landcare program fostered groups of neighbours to improve farmland by addressing several issues rather than a single problem like soil erosion, or tree dieback. The new term 'Landcare' rapidly became a general word for improving land and water management and agricultural practices and consequently increasing productivity and establishment of sustainable systems.

For many years conservationists and farmers had opposed each other, but during the 1980s Phillip Toyne, head of the Australian Conservation Foundation and Rick Farley, Executive Director of the National Farmers Federation, united their constituents to support 'ecological conservation'. As Prime Minister Bob Hawke said, it was:

*'An indication of the importance of this issue, and an inspiring demonstration of the way forward that they used their imagination and commitment to develop proposals and put them constructively to Government.'*³

The release in 1987 of the United Nations publication World Commission on Environment and Development, espousing ecologically sustainable development, had a resounding impact throughout the world. In Australia, in 1989, at Wentworth in NSW, bordering three states, Bob Hawke launched the national Statement of the Environment. Closing his speech, he said:

*'When the earth is spoiled, humanity and all living things are diminished. We have taken too much from the earth and given back too little. It's time to say enough is enough. Today's announcements won't solve everything. But with the right mix of political commitment and community support we can ensure that our country is simply the best in the world.'*⁴

A \$320 million package supported various efforts to improve the environment, including the 1990 Year of Landcare which extended into the Decade of Landcare 1990-2000. These ten years brought significant Australia-wide funding for a Landcare structure based on small local groups who conceived and drove their own projects, with assistance from local coordinators, and input from departments, agencies and others. Over the next ten years the number of Landcare groups expanded from 54 to 1550.⁵

Changing lives

'Anyone who manages a slice of natural resources knows that you really want to try and look after it and make it as healthy as possible. So, this was a really exciting time, and to have Bob Hawke, stand there, on the confluence of the Darling and the Murray and make that announcement, I think it changed a lot of people's lives, including mine.' – Rob Dulhunty

When Rob Dulhunty returned to Glen Innes in 1989, leaving his city finance job to look after the family property, his father said, 'There's this new thing called Landcare and we've started planting some trees, so why don't you try that.' He was immediately involved with about twenty or thirty neighbours, who lived in the over-cleared Furracabad Valley, calling themselves the Furracabad Creek Landcare group. He found 'an enormous enthusiasm toward addressing a lot of the natural resources issues that were in decline at the time.' Water was one resource 'that no-one talked about, and no-one really linked water quality to management practices ... if someone further down the stream is receiving bad water it affects them - so, all of a sudden you gain ownership of these issues, and you feel obliged to do something about it.'⁶

Rob was inspired by the Potter Farm plans, and Landcare, in trying to understand his new role as a farmer, and resolve what he saw as:

*...constant tension between production on the one hand and the environment on the other; and the prevailing wisdom at that time was that one was at the expense of the other. Whereas ... having looked at the Potter Farm Plans and started to get involved in Landcare, what made far more sense to me, was, that if you have a healthy resource base, all production is based upon that resource base, so the healthier your resource base, the more production you can get. So, actually there was no tension; one was hand-in-hand with the other.'*⁷

Owning the problem together

'What Landcare allowed, was people to get together and own the problem together ... traditionally the way governments work, is that they direct, or they do things to you, and the experts come along and tell you, 'This is how you do it.' Whereas this was turning that on its head. It was local managers or property managers saying, 'This is an issue. How do we address it? And we'd like to access some expertise to help us in our endeavours to fix this problem.' So that's really the true power of what Landcare does.' – Rob Dulhunty

The states all signed onto the Decade of Landcare Plan and the federal government through the states provided 'dollar-for-dollar' funding. Rob recalls the arrival of a local Landcare coordinator, employed through the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation, was a catalyst: 'She got all of these groups going around Glen Innes and it was amazing how many sprung up ... like throwing a little bit of water onto a seed - it flourished.'⁸

He also comments on the social element Landcare provided for him personally, 'Just returned from the city, it was a great way of getting to know all of my neighbours, so I got heavily involved.'⁹ More than that it filled a gap in the social networks of rural life. He reflects:

*'Landcare came along, and people started getting together over issues-based things, issues that they were all sharing problems with, and the social fabric came back into these small communities. All of a sudden, you'd get together for a barbeque at someone's house, and start talking about weeds, or feral animals, or the tree decline, all those sorts of things.'*¹⁰

By her mid-twenties Sonia Williams was well-qualified with a degree in agricultural business and management which she taught at Armidale TAFE and leadership experience in the Army Reserve. When her husband was ill for several years, she was thrown into the day-to-day running of their farm including all the manual work, driving tractors and drenching sheep. In her words: 'It was a good insight into what makes a rural property work.'

By 1990, she and fourteen neighbours were members of the Harnham Landcare group, concerned about loss of vegetation and consequent lack of shelter and shade for their stock. She says, 'The Landcare model actually allowed people to come together to discuss ... what the problems were, and with some expert help, understand ... what was the cause and effect.'¹²

They secured a government grant to plant trees, but, more importantly, Sonia appreciated:

*'The principles of adult education: adults learn best by doing ... you have to allow them to experiment and fail, and from that learn ... rural landholders have to learn by doing. Bring neighbours together to learn from each other and have their input as part of the solution. We were thought of as 'Greenie ratbags', but as the trees came up ... neighbours would look across the fence and see what was going on. By 2000 the group had swelled to 40 people.'*¹³

Sonia sees the Decade of Landcare as a 'Golden Age':

*'Well-supported by both federal government and state government – a social structure with dollars to do activities that were designed to increase people's understanding; the way to change social norms is to get people understanding and willingly doing the change themselves, rather than have it imposed through legislation.'*¹⁴

Karen Zirkler, a post-graduate research assistant from Edith Cowan University, travelling the southern parts of Australia in 1996-8, 'interviewing farmers and extension officers who had anything to do with farm forestry and agroforestry', discovered that Landcare was a great network. She recalls she found it incredibly easy to tap into those groups ... [they were] 'really interested, happy to help, easy to facilitate ... so helpful and cohesive.'¹⁵

When she moved to Armidale, she landed a position as a Landcare coordinator. Fulfilling her brief to develop a regional action plan, over the next twelve months she visited 28 Landcare groups criss-crossing the local government areas of Walcha, Uralla, Armidale and Guyra. She discovered 'what sort of activities they were keen to work on'. Common management themes in natural resources and sustainable agriculture included soil, pasture and grazing. In the area of vegetation, it included protection, tree planting and dealing with noxious plants and weeds. Another issue was the management of pest animals and groups wanted to talk about opportunities to learn more, or to increase their skills and equipment to do their job better.

Karen remembers this period of work in Southern New England Landcare during the Decade of Landcare, as 'joyous'.¹⁶

A sense of pride

'There was a real sense of pride in the mobilisation of huge numbers of people, working on the really hard issues, on the things that governments certainly didn't know how to tackle.'

– Karen Zirkler

David Walker has lived most of his life in Central West NSW. He grew up on the family property, studied rural science at the University of New England then worked with agricultural consultants assisting Aboriginal communities to acquire land. He left in 1974 to help his father and worked part of the family property for the next 25 years. He was a member of the local Mid Macquarie Landcare group, during the Decade of Landcare. He describes himself as 'a consumer of Landcare information in those early years and adopting changed practice on our property.' Like most farmers who are members of Landcare, he went to field days, learned from other farmers, had discussions and gradually became involved. As he changed his practice towards sustainable farming and nature conservation he felt: 'I could achieve more by being an advocate for it, rather than doing it only on my own property.' In 2000 he sold his land and worked on a river health project at Forbes then for twelve years as executive officer for an innovative sustainable farming group near Gunnedah, on the Liverpool Plains.

After Bob Hawke's declaration of the State of the Environment, there was an agreement between all states and the federal government to establish a national body, Landcare Australia Ltd, to support the Landcare community by raising money and inviting businesses and private benefactors to fund Landcare group activities and projects. Its brief also covered raising awareness of Landcare.

Consequently, the Decade of Landcare was widely promoted to the people of Australia. Landcare month was declared in 1991. In 1992 a set of five postage stamps, in an era when post was heavily used, were released illustrating key topics: salinity, soil erosion, farm planning, tree planting and dune care. The development of a logo in 1990 in the shape of Australia formed by two 'caring' hands is still recognised by over 70 percent of people today¹⁷. In 1993 a one-dollar coin was minted, embossed with the Landcare logo, which must have passed through millions of hands ever since, contributing to its continuing recognition. The printed White Pages phone directories 2002-3, then a go-to reference book which was provided free to the nation and lay around in countless homes and offices, had cover pictures of Landcare groups at work.



Designed by graphic designer Cliff Burk and Bill Fairbanks of Landcare Australia, 1990, the Caring Hands logo represents all Landcare groups.

Exchange of experience and knowledge was fostered through national conferences, the first in 1995. In NSW, statewide Landcare forums were held in conjunction with the state Total Catchment Management Committees (TCM), the first in 1996, and thereafter biannually.¹⁸

Working with government

During the Decade of Landcare, federal funding for community projects was an essential part of the Landcare movement, provided from 1992 by the National Landcare Program.¹⁹ To assist on the ground in NSW, in 1996 the Landcare Facilitator project funded twelve facilitators to help form networks of Landcare groups to take on larger challenges and organise them more effectively.

The federal government's creation of the Natural Heritage Trust in 1997 changed the nature and extent of the funding. Overall funds were dramatically increased, bolstered by the sale of the telecommunications company Telstra, to \$2 billion, but because there was more money involved, it was considered by government that greater control and accountability were required. As well, gradually during the early twenty-first century, there were several changes in structural relations between Landcare organisations and state government administration, in NSW.

In NSW the state government is responsible for water and primary industries. Initially the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation's Landcare section and its Landcare officers supported the efforts of the Landcare community and the NSW Landcare Working Group, which oversaw the delivery of the Decade of Landcare Plan in NSW. As a result, Landcare was supported statewide, with training and mentoring, grants, promotion and publicity and formal evaluation of the Plan and its outcomes undertaken. The Landcare unit and working group were part of the approach of Total Catchment Management and worked hand in hand with 18 Catchment Management Committees. Their brief was the 'coordinated and sustainable use of land, water and vegetation and other natural resources on a catchment basis so as to balance resource use and conservation.'²⁰ When the Catchment Management Committees became Catchment Management Boards, and later Catchment Management Authorities in the early 2000s they assumed the role of support for Landcare in their regions.²¹ The state Landcare unit was dissolved, and the understanding of the value of Landcare and the support it required varied markedly across the regions.

While the aims of the new catchment management body sought 'to encourage greater involvement of communities in managing their landscapes', its other aims indicated an increasingly bureaucratic, top-down approach as the new title Catchment Management Authority implied. As Rob Dulhunty reflects: 'The word "authority" was probably the wrong term; more about what they wanted to achieve, rather than what the local landowners wanted to do.' As Dr John Williams says in an analysis of Catchment Management Authority structure: 'it requires collaboration and a sense of co-ownership – both of which are time consuming and need to be adequately funded.'²² These changes affected the style of operation of Landcare in many areas of NSW.

Having worked overseas for many years with the World Health Organisation to improve the quality of training for health workers, Bill Pigott returned to Australia in 2000 and came to live in Berry. He set about rehabilitating his property – a cleared and degraded rainforest area. He got involved with his local Landcare groups practising bush regeneration on public and private land and the district and regional Landcare networks. His experience was that the local Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority chairperson saw Landcare as 'being good partners and helped them to be so'. Also, their own Landcare coordinator presented the groups' needs in terms that fitted with their Catchment Management Authority's and the funding brief. Another region that enjoyed a particularly supportive relationship was Northern Rivers.²³ However, for many Landcare groups, interaction with their Catchment Management Authority was difficult, or antagonistic.

The eventual emergence of the Catchment Management Authorities with their own goals of accountability and targets, meant increased bureaucracy; they used service providers, rather than Landcarers, or used them only as unpaid labour. The end result was that less and less funding reached the ground and many Landcare groups were, according to Rob, 'completely disempowered'. He describes the effect:

*'The million trees [project], for instance, would be contracted out, so you had a government agency and a service provider all taking their piece of the pie, before the money reaches the ground. And because there was no ownership of the projects when they hit the ground, the service provider would come along and say to you, or sell you as a landholder, "I need to plant 5,000 trees. Can I?" and the typical farmer would say, "What do I get out of it?" "Oh, we'll put a fence up for you." Well, in a couple of years the fence would fall over and the cattle would be back in amongst the trees and all the trees would be dead. It was a terribly disheartening period, for those of us that were involved in Landcare in the first decade.'*²⁴

Sonia Williams explains there was a lack of understanding and the government focus shifted to questions such as:

*'"Well, where's the physical change we can see? How many kilometres of stream has this fixed? How many hectares of this has it done?" Rather than looking at, "What was the social norm of practice before, what is the social norm of practice now?" and "What are the long-term trends in the condition health of our landscape and our productivity?" And it was measured in three-year cycles, and farming is anything but a three-year cycle; the environment's not a three-year cycle.'*²⁵

The program had changed from trying to encourage co-investment in projects and build partnerships to a position which fostered competition rather than collaboration. As Sonia recalls, 'it turned into a tender competitive process rather than "Let's sit round the table and see who can bring what to what?"'

Sonia adds that Landcare became 'a government-delivered program of fixing your gully or fixing your tree patch, rather than a program of helping you understand what the issue was so that you would manage it into the longer term.'²⁶

Landcare as a process

'My take on Landcare is that it's really about improving and building community ownership of the problems we're facing and the solutions to address it, rather than how a lot of people view Landcare, as fixing the land, fixing the trees or planting trees; they see it as the endpoint rather than the process. To me, Landcare is a process and not an endpoint, and the programs were focused on endpoints, not processes.' – Sonia Williams

Rob Dulhunty feels it became more about what the Catchment Management Authority wanted to achieve, rather than what the local landowners wanted to do. 'They would try and sell it to you, talk you into doing it, because they had to achieve their targets and achieve their goals.' Landcare began to be viewed as 'cheap delivery agents' ... 'they'll do it for nothing they're volunteers.' Much of the funding went to individual landowners rather than groups.

A 'groundswell of dissatisfaction' arose in many communities across NSW. The initial expectation that these new regional bodies would work hand in hand with Landcare was largely dashed, and many groups 'were completely disempowered by the bureaucracy that was put in place'.²⁷

Early in 2004 the State Landcare Working group was dissolved, so volunteer Landcarers worked with the Departments to ensure a Landcare presence could still be maintained in NSW. A new body, the NSW Landcare Committee, was formed in 2005, but it received little or no secretarial support, and once again results were dependent on volunteers.

Groundswell

Karen Zirkler recalls the ‘change, and change, and change’ of catchment management structure as ‘a period of great frustration’.

‘We felt like Landcare was such an amazing achiever, and such a powerful organisation to the broader community, but somehow it felt like we were being told we were a nobody, and we didn’t count anymore, we were worthless, or we weren’t the latest thinking, or way of doing things and therefore we should just shut up. So that caused a lot of passion to come out and, hence the formation, or the beginnings, of Landcare NSW.’

Karen, and David Walker, who both represented regional Landcare in the lead up to the 2007 State Landcare and Catchment Management Authority conference, found relations were ‘quite strained’ as the Catchment Management Authority wanted to exclude Landcare from the conference title and control how it was run.²⁸

David Walker was concerned by the emerging ‘model of natural resources managed by government agencies’ and that in some places the Catchment Management Authority saw ‘themselves as replacing Landcare.’ He was not one to sit quietly by and circulated an email headed Landcare Finds its Voice, encouraging members to meet at Myuna Bay on the shores of Lake Macquarie.²⁹ Rob also recalls that dissatisfaction was widespread. John Hughson, who was Landcare Officer responsible for 350 Landcare groups in the Lake Macquarie area, arranged the venue. Brian Scarsbrick, then CEO of Landcare Australia Ltd, provided financial support and attended with others from the organisation, as they too were concerned about the disenfranchisement of Landcare in NSW.

The ‘Landcare Gathering’, as it was dubbed, was held in June 2007 and attracted about 50 people, not only farmers but coastal and city groups too. The format was a ‘collaborative approach to getting to the base of the problem’ and ‘everybody had the right to be heard’. Rob suggested: ‘A state-based organisation like the New South Wales Farmers. Let’s have New South Wales Landcare.’ A working group was formed, comprising David Walker, John Hughson, Mandi Stevenson, Chris Scott and Rob Dulhunty.

At the conference in Tamworth on 25-27 October 2007, a separate meeting, known as the Landcare ‘Muster’, was held on 24 October at which Landcare members decided to form the NSW Landcare Community Reference Group to involve Landcarers from around the state and convey the voice of Landcarers to the NSW Government. After the Community Reference group’s first meeting in November 2007 David Walker registered the association and he and Chris Scott became interim joint co-convenors.

In a 2007 press release Chris Scott stated:

‘We have needed this linkage between the Landcare community and the State Government for a long time. The Landcare movement in NSW is active and growing, this new body will ensure that our voice is heard, and our achievements acknowledged. The formation of a state wide, representative body for Landcare will do much to ensure the contribution of the 47,000 Landcarers across NSW is properly valued.’³⁰

At the group’s third meeting held on 5 May 2008 office bearers were elected and David Walker became sole chairperson until 2011. He remarks that it was fortunate that he was working for a regional Landcare organisation at the time and its committee allowed him time to drive the process, including writing the constitution with input from others.

Those at the next Muster in Queanbeyan in 2008 unanimously endorsed the creation of Landcare NSW Incorporated - a council of representatives from each of 21 regions, roughly aligned with the regional Catchment Management Authorities and a separate eight-member executive committee. They avoided a top-down structure and as Rob recalls, 'embraced the messiness of Landcare' to accommodate its 'organic nature', acknowledging that 'wherever we went each Landcare looked different and had evolved their own structures, either local, district or regional'.³¹

The Muster emphasised enabling communication between Landcarers in all 13 catchments in NSW. The new Council was determined not to organise and control but rather assist the 1874 groups around the state to run themselves. To this end the pattern of holding Musters was continued in conjunction with the biennial conference, as this was when Landcarers came together.³² The format of Musters was 'loose'; initially it was facilitated by Landcare volunteers or employees, the last two have been led by a paid facilitator. Bill Pigott offered to facilitate the early Musters saying he emphasised the importance of actually recording participants' own words.

*'We would give them three cards, and ask them to give three points, or three answers, or three proposals, a word or a phrase, and we would write it up using the words that were written, and we would report, in the words of the participants.'*³³

Sonia emphasises:

*'What's really important at the end of the conference, [is] an initial Muster feedback that shows the change from last Muster to this Muster and the top issues and some suggestions going forward. And then we do a full report which we then send out to everybody - it probably takes about three months to get that fully digested - and that then forms the strategic direction for Landcare NSW and so that becomes the underpinning document, about where we go.'*³⁴

The Muster

'It's really designed to get people together and talk and we use semi-structured processes, to recap what's been happening, and then to get their feedback into some state-level initiatives, issues and processes, and then a bit of a free space, "What are the big issues in your area? How might you tackle them?"' - Sonia Williams

Ideas for the nature and scope of Landcare NSW were gradually implemented. The national government in 2010 asked for input from all state Landcare organisations to its Framework for Landcare. Bill recollects that Landcare NSW had done a very good job incorporating views from their Landcare community, as did other states in a facilitated session at a national conference. He feels, 'The Framework represents the voice of the Landcarers at that time, in their language'.³⁶

The generic term 'Landcare' is described in the Framework for Landcare. In writing this, David Walker recalls, 'We [Landcare NSW] were all part of that, and I think we were defining our point of difference, and a lot of thinking went into it.' What stands out as particular to Landcare were 'the movement's intrinsic community level autonomy, and its commitment to collaboration and cooperation' should be recognised. The core of this work was the expression of Landcare as an ethic, a movement and a model.

Landcare is an approach that comprises:

Ethic – a philosophy, influencing the way people live and work in the landscape while caring for the land (soil, water and biota).

Movement – local community action founded on stewardship and volunteerism, putting the philosophy into practice.

Model – a range of knowledge generation, sharing and support mechanisms including groups, networks (from district to national levels), facilitators and coordinators, government and non-government policies, structures, programs and partnerships influencing broad-scale community participation in sustainable resource management.³⁸

The Framework also wanted to 'capture and celebrate the achievements of Landcare' which had, as Karen mentioned, been denigrated and portrayed as unsuccessful which was damaging to volunteer and employee morale. Landcare NSW supported state level awards and consciously collected and published its multiple success stories, in print and on its website.

By 2013 a major request from the Muster of 2009 was honoured with the presentation at the Newcastle Muster of an impressive set of resources to help groups. These included: governance checklists, fact sheets, policy documents and insurance guidelines. This helped to 'stop people re-inventing wheels ... by taking away some of the harder work, or doing some bigger partnerships, enabling rather than replacing groups.'³⁹ They also provided celebratory stories and the Council produced a quarterly newsletter The Advocate after each of its meetings to communicate with all its members.

Landcare Coordinators

Another constant request from Musters was for Local Landcare coordinators. They are, as Sonia Williams says, 'always high on the list.' They form the backbone of the whole operational concept of Landcare. During the Decade of Landcare, they had provided the impetus for change by linking people and ideas and funding. Sonia describes their evolution:

'What we found was local groups forming, and then within a district those local groups coming together and looking for support. Under the Decade of Landcare program we actually put out local Landcare coordinators, generally part-time workers, often from the community they worked in, and very skilled at bringing in in-kind contribution from either local government or business - cadging an office in the back room somewhere - so in reality it was quite a cheap program to run.'

Rob describes their impact:

'They knew how to bring people together. They were the catalyst ... they'd come and see me, sit around and have a cup of tea and say:

"What's your issue?"

"Well, I've got these problems."

"Well, I've just seen your neighbours and they've got the same problem, you know."

"Oh, right."

*"Well, we should get together and work it all out."*⁴⁰

As funding was withdrawn many areas lost their coordinator, or these positions were absorbed into the Catchment Management Authorities. David Walker recalls, 'Landcare groups lost any sense of ownership or direction without them.'

Karen recalls the importance, too, of regular meetings for the Landcare coordinators from around NSW: 'getting together with my peers', comparing notes, techniques and projects and why they were successful. She recalls that as funding was withdrawn, 'We operated in isolation for a long, long time as part of those frustration years.'⁴¹

As a Landcare coordinator Karen feels the nature of groups changed and that they became less active. They were dealt a blow when in the early 2000s more grants tended to be given to individuals. She says:

*'There's an argument that says groups became too dependent on funding to make things happen, but then there's this other argument that says well, had the focus not shifted from groups to individuals, this breakdown of groups wouldn't have happened, and I believe that was a really big factor, in groups not needing to get together anymore.'*⁴²

She also thinks that increasingly preoccupation with social media, and busy lives, compounded by years of drought have taken their toll.

Landcare is collaborative

'We're not competing, we are in a collaboration; we're a collaborative community, a community that shares things.' – Bill Pigott

Landcare NSW Inc started to lobby politicians in the lead up to the 2011 state election. They secured a small amount of funding which David mentions was 'very tightly managed by the government' but Landcare NSW did manage to 'develop some projects that demonstrated the importance of this local level support'.⁴³

At the Musters, Sonia says, 'We try to lift people away from the bio-physical issues to articulating challenges such as getting support, getting people, finding skills.'⁴⁴

One successful example of this was the Communities in Landscape project 2011-12, initiated with \$4.2m funding from the Australian Government's 'Caring for our Country'. The inclusion of partners' contributions raised the project to a monetary value of nearly \$10m. The magnitude of the project placed an enormous strain on a relatively new community organisation however it was a positive achievement and 'a great highlight' of leader Mandi Stevenson's career. Chairperson of Landcare NSW during the project, she writes that Landcare in NSW was chosen to drive the project as it had:

'...no affiliation to any particular agency or government, and it could provide the key link to community groups and landholders mainly on private land. It facilitated a coordinated approach making understanding and integrating disciplines a much easier process. The benefits to each of the partner organisations has been great, the environment and the landholders involved have been the winners in this project, which is the ultimate aim of Landcare.'

Reinvigorated and inspired

'Landcare groups and members have been reinvigorated and inspired again to work collectively and collaboratively to achieve more for the environment, as well as for their own properties.' – Mandi Stevenson

As the reputation and success of Landcare NSW grew, so did its workload, stretching resources and personnel. The Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) generously provided a grant in 2014-2015 to undertake research and develop a strategic plan for the future operation of Landcare NSW. The main issues identified were lack of funding and the need to increase government support for Landcare throughout the state.

The grant from the VFFF enabled closer communication with government agencies such as Local Land Services, the Office of the Environment and Heritage and the Department of Primary Industries, as well as relevant ministers, advisors and Members of Parliament. Assistance from state government ministers, Troy Grant, Katrina Hodgkinson and Niall Blair, together with other state Members, Mick Veitch and Jeremy Buckingham, aided Landcare to rebuild. Politicians' staff also made a significant difference behind the scenes, as did many public servants.

As a result of Landcare NSW's persistence, and the mobilisation of Landcarers to make representations to sitting and potential candidates, a significant commitment was made by all political parties before the 2015 state election, which yielded \$15 million over three and a half years to fund Landcare coordinators and support. As well, coordinator meetings each year were reinstated, and Karen hopes 'they continue into the next initiative'.⁴⁵ At the 2019 election, once again Labor, the Coalition and the Greens pledged to maintain support for Landcare. The renewed partnership with the NSW government during this period was critical to Landcare's development.

Communities and governments

‘Communities are constant. ... these communities are there, they’ve been there and they will be there as we go through the spectrum of past, present to future. Governments change all the time - government departments change even more than governments change - so having Landcare as a constant, as we move through our history, is becoming, I think, increasingly relevant because as government departments change and governments change, they actually forget.’ – Robert Dulhunty

Rob considers that Landcare NSW staff member Leigh McLaughlin was instrumental in pointing out the importance of support from the local Members of Parliament by inviting them to local Landcare community events. He explains: ‘It’s not hard for a local Member to understand the importance of Landcare and why it exists and why they need to support it.’⁴⁶ Since 2015 the NSW Parliamentary Friends of Landcare at State Parliament has had 30 or 40 members, and held events, such the annual ‘Trees in the House’, to show parliamentarians Landcare’s work. As Rob says, ‘It’s such an important thing, it’s such a strong thing, it’s such a win-win thing, it’s hard for anyone not to support it.’⁴⁷

As chairperson of Landcare NSW, Rob was part of Minister’s Advisory Committee to frame the formation of Local Land Services which replaced the Catchment Management Authorities in January 2014. Local Land Services Chairs, Alex Anthony and Richard Bull provided the leadership to allow Landcare to progress.

In September 2015 Landcare NSW and the government’s Local Land Services signed a memorandum of understanding to work in partnership and formed a Joint Management Committee co-chaired by Local Land Services and Landcare NSW. Rob speaks with pride about this achievement which recognises Landcare NSW experience and expertise, and ‘that allows Landcare to sit alongside the management of Local Land Services, and co-govern and co-design, and co-deliver the services that we [Landcare] provide.’⁴⁸

He hopes, ‘Landcare NSW will be there if the government ever decides to change from Local Land Services to something else, because, that underlying knowledge and actual access to community, is really important when governments are trying to form how they deliver their services.’⁴⁹

Landcare NSW had a goal to establish stronger relationships with a wider group of government agencies and other external organisations. To this end, Landcare NSW focused on explaining, in a report commissioned in 2017 by CEO Adrian Zammit (Regional Data Snapshots of Landcare NSW’s Impact), the economic value of volunteer contributions.⁵⁰ Measuring it in monetary terms made government at all levels more appreciative of Landcare’s ‘in-kind’ contribution to sustainable agricultural and environmental improvement.⁵¹

Relations with the national Landcare body

David remembers, 'After we formed Landcare NSW it was fairly clear that Landcare was not being well supported federally; the Decade of Landcare had disappeared, year-on-year federal funding was plummeting.'⁵² Some states – Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania – had state Landcare representatives. After much effort, mainly telephoning, David and his colleagues found suitable people to represent the other states and formed a national representative body, the National Landcare Network, in 2011.

Rob thinks that:

'Landcare Australia Limited had focused on fundraising but it had no representative structure, legitimising itself as speaking for Landcare. Landcare NSW had always worked very closely with Landcare Australia Limited, in New South Wales, and [it] had been very helpful building the organisation in New South Wales. When the National Landcare Network was set up, as a membership-based organisation, to represent Landcare members at a national level, tensions developed which detracted from the idea of providing leadership to the whole of Australia's Landcare movement.'

National institutional arrangements for Landcare are continuing to evolve as representatives from the Landcare community work through the issues that tend to occur in many organisations trying to bring together different states and entities to achieve a unified national approach.

Community fabric

'One of the great things for me about the Landcare involvement, about the sharing of concepts and sharing of ideas, is that if you allow yourself, you learn and grow and change yourself.' – Bill Pigott

'There's the tennis clubs, the churches and those sorts of things, aren't the same as they used to be generations ago. Landcare provided for me that social mechanism to introduce me to the community and to be part of that community. Then sharing with those people along the way our learnings and watching our environment improve.' – Sonia Williams

'It surprised a lot of people, how powerful, how strong it is, that these Landcare groups mightn't have any projects to do, but they still meet because it's replaced the social fabric that's been inadvertently taken out of these communities over time. So that's an accidental outcome, and how do you measure the value of that? Almost impossible. But is it valuable? Extremely!' – Robert Dulhunty

Little River Landcare group in a catchment of the Macquarie River valley in Central Western NSW, considers itself 'innovative and highly professional' ... focusing on: environment; social and community member wellbeing and the economy in our local communities'. They also consider themselves as, 'not a traditional Landcare group.'⁵³

David thinks the period since the Millennium drought, and the current drought,

*'...have been horrific and unprecedented times of difficulty. Little River Landcare set itself the task of having zero suicides from farmer stress, and they've been successful, as far as I know, because rural suicide has been a dreadful outcome of the conditions that people have been facing, so I think that's probably one reason that they might say they're different.'*⁵⁴

Language of Landcare

The 'voice' of Landcarers is a frequently evoked term, several articles and reports have been written about finding the voice or hearing the voice of its members.

Bill Pigott stresses that language is important. Clear headings such as, 'You asked we delivered', that continue to be used in Musters, send a direct message, as opposed to, for example: 'the strategic outcomes following consultation.'⁵⁵ Bill recalls:

*'I was amazed as I saw things being taken from [a] report, and converted into bureaucratic language which soon lost it, soon changed the nature of it, because then you could group things together and say that this is what they wanted, when you know that that wasn't exactly what they wanted, because when they expressed it, they were saying something else. [Being] careful of what language you're using, and being careful that you are not taking shortcuts, and assuming that you know what the grassroots people are thinking. And that really requires constant effort, and constant engagement of the grassroots, so that you're both listening to them, and you're actually hearing what they're saying.'*⁵⁶

A positive use of words also expresses the Landcare ethic and ideas better. Bill gives examples; rather than a 'plan of action', to say a 'framework' suggests a flexible construct; or the difference between 'no wealth' and 'wealth which is non-material', or, 'no resources' and 'abundant people resources, but limited financial resources.'⁵⁷

Bill Pigott regrets that Framework for Landcare which encapsulated all Landcare's beliefs and aspirations is not referred to now, ten years after it was written:

*'I was at a Landcare Australia meeting once when somebody said 'Oh, we know all that.' and I found myself saying, 'You might know it all but we need to be reminded that these were the basic principles, that these were the values, that we have, and that these are the values we need to protect.'*⁵⁸



The way ahead

Discussing how Landcare NSW will fare, all the people interviewed are aware that much has been achieved and there is still work to be done: maintenance work such as government relations, internal relations, operations and building partnerships and new revenue sources, but above all, handing on the responsibility and keeping the spirit and vision of Landcare NSW alive.

Relations with all levels of government need to be fostered, especially federal and local. Across the state, in rural and urban areas, local government supports numerous Landcare groups. However, Bill feels there is room for greater engagement. Rob reflects on the importance of federal support saying:

*'It's been a long time coming but when national leadership is provided for Landcare, and Landcare is able to form the sort of relationships that can be trusted, with the federal government, I think Landcare will be in much better shape to face the challenges that, we, as a country, need to stand up to and address. Those challenges are getting more and more severe, and more and more intense, and require more and more effort, to succeed, in continuing to manage our natural resources successfully.'*⁵⁹

Landcare NSW has acquired an enormous repository of knowledge and experience within thousands of people involved in 3000 groups across the state, along with current and retired committee members. This is appreciated and recently Landcare NSW created a Landcare NSW 'Council of Elders' to retain and access this knowledge.

David feels the organisation's representative structure needs to be protected:

*'The structure that has been put there, in that it's very much focused on representativeness, and making sure that representatives are endorsed by their local communities, is absolutely crucial.'*⁶⁰

Another element according to Bill, is to be alert to the predominance of economic rationalism:

*'We must talk up the powerful contribution that volunteers make. We must be ready to say that our volunteers are this valuable within this economy, where decisions are made by people who see it as an economy, rather than as a community.'*⁶¹

Karen reflects:

*'Even though Landcare might be represented at the state level, it still needs to be able to truly value, and know, that it is connected to, really well-connected to, the grassroots right across the state. And not lose that connection. Landcare is not Landcare NSW, or Landcare Australia, or the National Landcare Network, Landcare really is all those people out there who are getting on with it on the ground.'*⁶²

Generational handover is always an issue especially when a strong activist group inspired by the need for change begin to relinquish their positions. However, all those interviewed were confident that there are younger and equally inspired people taking on leadership, people who are experienced and believe in Landcare NSW. Rob's view adds to this:

*'Some of those people are now coming through onto council, and so the capacity of the individuals that we have around the table, on our council, has been strengthened, and is deeper now, because of that increase in activity at the ground level.'*⁶³

David considers:

*'It depends on the success of Landcare on the ground, breeding people who see Landcare NSW as an important supporter of what they've been able to achieve, so therefore they're prepared to put themselves forward to take a turn, in being representatives so that there's a turnover and succession happening from the local groups on the ground to Landcare NSW.'*⁶⁴

Conclusion

Landcare NSW has grown outwards from its members' needs and representations. It is a successful example of how such a bottom-up system can work. Twelve years after Landcare NSW's foundation there has been a handover to a new generation. The challenge it faces is to maintain its equilibrium operating in a different world where the hierarchical model of governance predominates.

There is a conviction amongst Landcarers who are working on the ground and those who are working to facilitate the organisation's goals, that their purpose is fundamental and has longevity. Bill Pigott reflects:

'You'll hear frequently in Landcare meetings, when there's another change in government, or another change in bureaucracies, you'll hear people saying, "Ah, but we existed long before these changes and we will exist long after." And I think it's a matter of maintaining that. ... We are custodians of the land on which we live - we have a duty of care ... people want to be in their local forest, in their local woodland, in their local patch - practising their duty of care.'

David Watts, Northern Sydney Aboriginal Heritage Officer, echoes these sentiments which extend to the earliest human occupation of Australia:

'We cannot go back and reinvent the past, only learn from it. Some knowledge that has been lost cannot be recaptured. A rock engraving destroyed or faded away is gone forever. However, as the bush regenerators know, the seedlings that are given the right conditions today will become tomorrow's resilient canopy.'

*The climate is changing, and the urban bushland is under increasing pressure. The many traditions of looking after one's local area are more important than ever.'*⁶⁵

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