

Southern New England Landcare: Enabling and Supporting Stewardship for Over 30 Years

KEY MESSAGES

Southern New England Landcare Ltd is one of the most successful and long-lived rural landcare networks in Australia. A community-based organisation with over 700 members and friends, and servicing 2 million hectares in the New England region of northern New South Wales, its mission is 'to



(Image courtesy of Michael Taylor and www.snelandcare.org.au)

lead, connect and enable our communities to achieve their sustainability goals in a changing environment'. As a vital intermediary, it handles the administration and governance of stewardship projects, which allows volunteers, farmers and other landholders to get on with the job. Its success in building community capacity has enabled local land stewards to achieve long-lasting on-ground action and change.

This case study is based on interviews with Southern New England Landcare staff in 2021, and materials supplied by the organisation. Seven key points for improving for Australia's investment in rural stewardship emerge:

1. Funding for networks and groups such as Southern New England Landcare has **decreased** in real terms for on-ground stewardship and essential co-ordination and governance activities. Funding is more competitive, with higher **transaction costs** and slimmer chances of success. Application processes have become **complex**, project objectives more **prescriptive**, and project reporting conditions more **onerous**.
2. **Volatility** in funding arrangements and the **short-term** nature of projects is inconsistent with the character of rural environmental problems, which will require a persistent stream of investment over the long-term. Providing public funds on a short-term basis for demonstration sites is the wrong approach. The stop-start nature of project-based funding makes it hard to retain staff, leading to a loss of corporate memory and increased transaction costs.
3. Many agri-environmental problems require concerted and long-running **collaborative action** at landscape scale. Funding bodies now tend to focus more on individual landholders and less on network and group projects than in the past, which potentially undermines the collaborative ethos

nurtured by many landcare networks. Such an ethos is hard won, and easily lost, and processes that undermine collective action should be discouraged.

4. Funding processes for rural stewardship should be **user-friendly, flexible and agile**, taking account of the myriad pressures faced by rural landholders, such as drought, bushfires and other natural disasters seen over the last few years.
5. Better **recognition of the value** of rural stewardship is needed, including of on-ground works on private and public lands, and the co-ordination and administrative functions of intermediaries such as landcare networks and groups. It is also necessary to value the role of generalist landcare staff in enabling better strategic planning, collaboration and co-ordination.
6. The collective experience of stewardship is not adequately recorded, valued and analysed, which is a lost opportunity for **learning** from experience and systematic **continuous improvement**. Time pressures on landholders and landcare staff due to under-resourcing hinder meaningful peer-to-peer learning.
7. There is **immense untapped and unrealised potential** in rural Australia to accelerate environmental restoration and protection. Rural landholders and volunteers are ready and willing to do more, but are stymied by resource constraints.

These factors have aggravated a run of tough years, with drought, storms, bushfires, and Covid. The end result is a feeling of exhaustion and burnout amongst landholders and volunteers. Greater recognition of the value provided by land stewards and community organisations that support them is needed to achieve Australia's aspirations to protect biodiversity and restore the land.

But despite the challenges over the past few years, Landcare staff remain upbeat about the value of landcare networks and their potential to play a stronger role in helping local people 'own' local problems and find solutions. They are confident that within local rural communities there exists the potential to self-organise and adapt in the face of an uncertain future. Properly resourced landcare networks and adequate investment in land stewards will be pivotal in this journey.



(Image courtesy of Michael Taylor and www.snelandcare.org.au)

This case study was prepared by Andrew Lawson and Paul Martin, Australian Centre for Agriculture & Law, at the University of New England (UNE), Armidale, NSW, Australia.

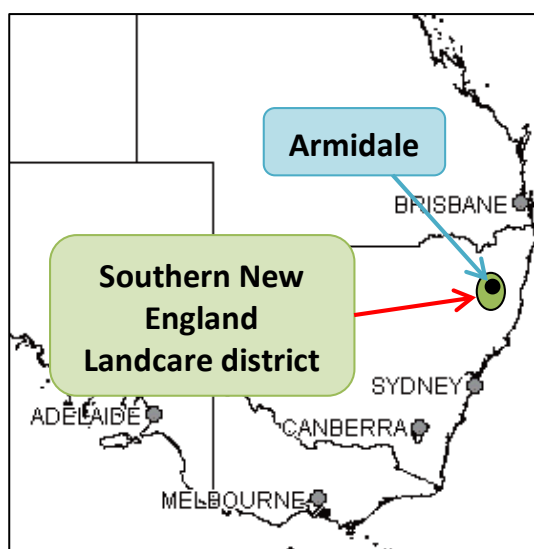
Email: andrew.lawson@une.edu.au

Ph: +61 2 6773 3551

v4 – 13Mar2022

In a nutshell ...

Southern New England Landcare is a non-government, not-for-profit, membership-based, community organisation, whose mission is 'to lead, connect and enable our communities to achieve their sustainability goals in a changing environment'.¹ It operates at the southern end of the New England Tablelands in northern NSW. The Landcare network services an area of about 2 million hectares – larger than the ACT. It has an operational shopfront in the regional city of Armidale, in the centre of the network's service area, which crosses four local government areas – Armidale, Uralla, Walcha, and the tablelands portion of Tamworth Regional Council.

**Region and history**

The network's service area is largely rural, with agriculture being a mainstay of local economies. Armidale is a regional centre about 170 km from the coast and roughly halfway between Brisbane and Sydney, each being about 450 to 500 km away. The New England region is renowned for its scenery and natural treasures. At about 1,000 metres above sea level, the region is by Australian standards 'high country', atop the Great Dividing Range that separates the coast from the inland along the eastern side of Australia.

The region's value to colonial pastoralists was recognised in the 1830s – relatively early in Australian colonial history. As a result, First Nations of the region – including the Anaiwan, Gamilaraay, Dunghutti, Gumbaynggirr, Ngarbal and others – have endured dispossession of traditional lands for longer than most parts of Australia. Treatment of First Nations peoples in northern New South Wales by incoming pastoralists during the colonial period was particularly brutal, with several recorded massacre sites. Nonetheless, the presence of First Nations peoples in the region remains strong, and they are significant landholders. Thus, Southern New England Landcare's operating district comprises a mosaic of private freehold, Crown leasehold, Aboriginal owned or managed land, public reserves (including national parks, State forests, and travelling stock reserves), towns and villages and other local government lands, and unallocated Crown lands.

Continuity despite tough years

Rural landholders across Australia have endured a series of natural disasters over the last few years. The mega-drought from 2017 to 2019 was as tough as any living farmer can remember, confirmed by the Bureau of Meteorology:

*"2019 was Australia's warmest ... driest year on record for Australia ... well below the previous record in 1902 [T]he extraordinarily low rainfall experienced this year has been comparable to that seen in the driest periods in Australia's recorded history, including the Federation Drought and the Millenium Drought."*²

The prolonged drought merged into the worst bushfire season in many years. In the middle of the drought, the Walcha district was hammered by 'the worst storm in living memory ... Thousands of trees came crashing down, killing stock and wildlife'³, but with insufficient rain to relieve the dry conditions. The bushfire season had not ended by the time news

¹ <https://www.snelandcare.org.au/>

² <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/annual/aus/2019/>

³ <https://www.northerndailyleader.com.au/story/5842387/how-walcha-is-recovering-from-the-worst-storm-in-living-memory/>

of the Covid pandemic emerged internationally. Initially affecting metropolitan communities, Covid eventually became an issue for the entire population, including rural and regional communities. Even as the El Niño conditions waned and rainfall returned in a La Niña phase, rural communities had to face another challenge consistent with climate change projections. This time it was the volatility of storms and rainfall. In late 2021, Armidale endured a tornado, and 2022 saw increased intensity of rainfall events, part of the same weather pattern that brought devastating floods to southern Queensland, north-coast New South Wales and other east coast communities.

Southern New England Landcare staff report that negative public perceptions of rural landholders generally can dishearten responsible rural land stewards. Many of the Landcare network's land stewards have won national recognition for their environmental management. Good land stewards do sometimes feel "tarred with the same brush" as less responsible landholders, blamed for land degradation, climate change, and destruction of habitat for at-risk species such as koalas. These factors affect landholders' motivation and enthusiasm for stewardship activities, as well as their investment in such activities.

Agricultural enterprises suitable to a mild to cool temperate climate are found in the New England – including orchards, horticulture, grains, and fodder crops – but it is most famous for grazing – mostly sheep and cattle for wool and meat. Agriculture is a vital economic sector for the region but has a legacy of land degradation and environmental problems. Southern New England Landcarers address these problems by way of:

- Habitat protection, and restoration of remnant native bushland, mostly on farms but also public land and urban spaces;
- Revegetation and farm forestry for wildlife habitat, livestock shade and shelter, and carbon sequestration.
- Management of water quality, riparian areas and wetlands;
- Management of woody vegetation, weeds and invasive pests;
- Soil health, ameliorating erosion, and reversing soil degradation;
- Sustainable grazing and pasture management, and animal welfare, emphasising productive farms with functioning agri-ecosystems;
- Community participation and co-ordination of hundreds of volunteers, including farmers, other landholders, volunteers, schools, and youth;
- Consultative planning ranging from individual landholdings (property scale), to sub-catchments, and the network's entire service area; and
- Community capacity building and networking.



Members' stewardship activities

Support roles

Southern New England Landcare acts as a governance 'umbrella' for smaller groups and individuals – an important function in a rural community. This provides essential services, such as public liability insurance, financial accounting of grants, management of project milestones, and a legal body that can take responsibility for funded projects. These administrative functions can be onerous for small groups and individuals, and can deter

them from undertaking public interest activities. Southern New England Landcare lowers this barrier.

The Landcare network plays an intermediary role between larger organisations such as government, corporate sponsors and philanthropists, and small local groups and individuals. This helps balance the power difference, ensures project accountability, and provides a central point of contact to communicate to and rally local stewards around opportunities.

Growth and evolution

Southern New England Landcare has evolved from its beginnings in 1990 as a consortium of small groups committed to the landcare ethos, which developed in rural communities throughout Australia in the 1980s and 90s. Southern New England Landcare has been one of the more successful and long-lived landcare networks. It operates as a 'company limited by guarantee', a structure reserved for charities and non-profit organisations. As such, it must comply with more onerous accountability, governance and auditing standards.

The corporate structure of the network is led by a Board of unpaid directors, guided by a reference committee representing 30 groups, local government and other stakeholders. Most financial members are connected to one of the 30 landcare groups formed by neighbouring landholders (see map below). Peri-urban and urban groups have also formed, as well as interest-based groups, such as 'Save the Regent Honeyeater Group'. All benefit from the network's public liability insurance. Southern New England Landcare has a social media following of over 700 supporters, through which it channels landcare information and news.

The nature of Southern New England Landcare's work means that it has become a training ground in skills development and capacity building for both paid staff and unpaid directors. One of the challenges the network faced in moving to a company structure was the increased governance responsibilities of its volunteer directors. It responded to this challenge by offering its directors foundational governance training through the Australian Institute of Company Directors. This type of capacity building has flow-on effects for the wider community by developing a pool of candidates for a range of other community boards – e.g. in health services, natural resource management and biodiversity conservation.

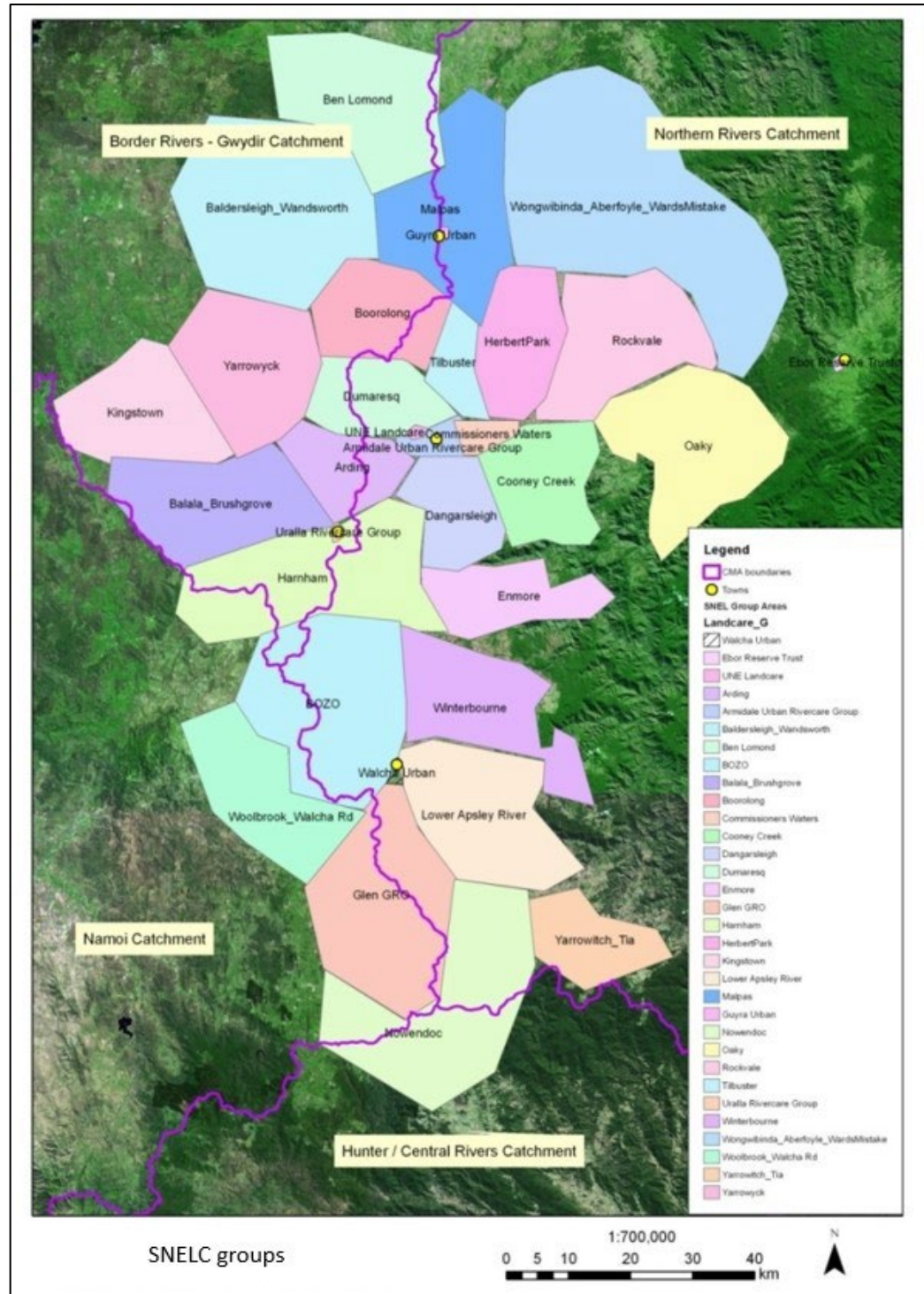
Planning

Southern New England Landcare has always emphasised planning to enable long-term responses to collective problems. This allows on-ground stewards to better understand issues, and provides a framework to prioritise projects. It allows the organisation to understand the needs, desires, and capabilities of individuals, groups, and the network as a whole. It also helps the network to position itself in broader planning processes, such as the Local Land Services investment strategy, and enables it to present as a well organised outfit, when approaching funders.

Funding and achievements

Southern New England Landcare has no independent revenue. It is dependent on members for voluntary work, cash and in-kind contributions, as well as government grants, local government and private sponsorships, and philanthropy. Funds from Federal and State grant programs are won project-by-project in mostly competitive funding rounds. The network has been successful, securing over \$10 million from government programs over the past 15 years.

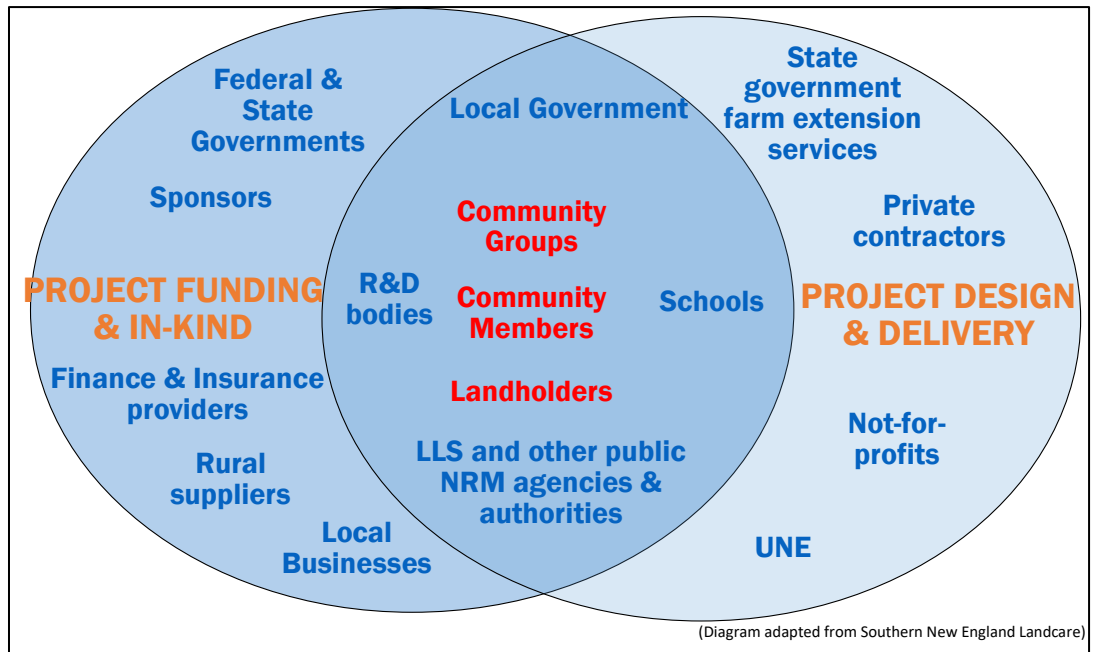
Landcare staff estimate that for every \$1 in external funding, \$4 to \$6 of environmental works occurred throughout the network's service area. This has flow-on effects to local business, including nurseries, rural suppliers, trainers, workshop and conference venues and caterers, and consultants.



Partnerships and collaborations

Southern New England Landcare leverages its funding by collaborations. Partnerships with local governments have provided thousands of dollars in office space and support. Sponsors include the NSW Government’s Local Land Services; Flight Centre; Regional Australia Bank; University of New England; and Wesfarmers Federation Insurance (WFI).⁴ The network has collaborated with many organisations, including New England Weeds Authority, National Parks & Wildlife Service, Armidale Tree Group, and Green Corps.

⁴ <https://www.snelandcare.org.au/resources/our-supporters.html>



Southern New England Landcare has co-ordinated major collaborative initiatives including:

- **'High Country Urban Biodiversity' (HiCUB)** – A 2-year urban partnership with four local governments and community stakeholders, with almost \$2 million in funding from the NSW Environmental Trust.
- **Securing Urban Water Quality in the Malpas Catchment** – A long-term initiative to improve water quality and catchment health with local governments, and community stakeholders. The network facilitated planning, field days, on-ground works, research, and educational materials.
- **Land, Water & Wool** – A research partnership with landholders, Land & Water Australia, Australian Wool Innovation, UNE, extension agencies, consultants and community stakeholders, with \$750,000 from industry for research on the economic value of biodiversity. The success of this initiative led to **Land, Water & Wool 2** – a collaboration with landholders, the National Landcare Program, Regional NRM bodies, consultants, and UNE. This secured close to \$700,000 in landholder contributions and more than \$600,000 of external funding for stream bank protection, alternative watering points, fencing for remnant and riparian vegetation protection, and revegetation.
- **Frog Dreaming** – A youth engagement initiative involving 100 primary school students, local government, landholders, schools, National Parks & Wildlife Service, Local Land Services, and other stakeholders.



THREE TRENDS IN POLICY PHILOSOPHIES

1. Regional enviro- governance

Over two to three decades, Southern New England Landcare staff have noticed trends that have affected funding for on-ground works by landcare networks and groups.

1. Volatility in regional environmental governance approaches;
2. An individualistic approach to allocating public funds; and
3. Using public funds as seed money for demonstration sites.

NSW's 2013 Local Land Services (LLS) legislation consolidated agricultural extension and public land management agencies. For a period, public stewardship funds were no longer devolved to landcare networks such as Southern New England Landcare; instead funds were allocated directly to individuals. Such arrangements can reduce the independence of community organisations but can also relieve them of some administrative and governance responsibilities. A downward trend in Government extension has reduced support for agri-environmental activities.

Each re-structure of regional arrangements requires Southern New England Landcare to renegotiate relationships with regional administrations. The network enjoys a robust and fruitful relationship with regional bodies but changes can confuse landcare staff, regional agency staff, landholders and other frontline stewards about the role of the organisation, communications, and principles of engagement.

2. Individualised Funding

Previously, governments were willing to devolve funds for on-ground works to landcare networks for group projects. Southern New England Landcare would convene the groups

to work on landscape-scale solutions to group problems. This reflects the nature of many agri-environmental problems, such as invasive species management and biodiversity conservation, which require collaborative action at scale across diverse landholdings.



According to Southern New England Landcare staff, governments have moved to favour individual applications from landholders. Ostensibly, this aimed to enhance access to funding, since not every landholder is a network member. The change has disrupted the collaborative mindset that was cultivated by landcare networks and which previously drove participation in groups. Despite efforts by LLS to reignite a group ethos with a landscape-wide focus, the effect has been enduring:

“Very few of us realised the effect that was going to have, which was the destruction of all of that community group capital – social capital – that was built in the era when groups were valued ... That’s a large part of why our landcare groups are now dying, dead, or hibernating.”

3. Demonstration projects

Governments often invest in ‘demonstration projects’. The assumption is that a ‘proof of concept’ will convince landholders to undertake similar work, though ongoing funding is never guaranteed. The demonstration model aims to encourage entrepreneurship among non-government stewardship organisations hoping that they become autonomous, self-reliant, and self-funded. This ‘start-up’ model of stewardship funding does seem to misunderstand the public interest nature of stewardship work – it is rarely commercial and rarely attracts sufficient and consistent market support.

Demonstration or pilot projects are usually short-lived with narrow objectives and limited funds, which is not compatible with the long-term nature of stewardship problems. The ‘projectisation’ of stewardship funding creates problems for networks, sub-groups and land managers because project funding is inherently unreliable – it may or may not be available at the end of the short-lived venture. Many aspects of land stewardship, such as nature conservation and soil restoration, are not incentivised by markets, and rely on public funding, landholder resources and goodwill, with occasional philanthropic windfalls.

The stop-start nature of project-based funding makes it hard to retain staff, because the employment characteristics of landcare work are unstable. Loss of staff involves loss of corporate memory, adding transaction costs in training and mentoring new staff.

Policy objectives and timeframes misaligned

An over-emphasis on short-term projects brings a risk that policy objectives and project timeframes may not be well aligned. The Landcare staff noticed this during the mega-drought of 2017-2019, when government funds became available for drought-oriented projects. The catch-cry of these projects was ‘resilience-building’. However, the time allowed for resilience-building projects – usually around 12 months or less – did not match the task. Resilience-building takes years, if not generations, of active community engagement and capacity building. This is the sort of work that landcare networks have engaged in for decades. When Southern New England Landcare is successful in a 12-month resilience-building project, it is because of years of effort – much of it unfunded – before and after any short-term ‘resilience-building’ project.



THREE TRENDS IN LANDCARE RESOURCING

1. Drying-up of landcare network funding

Southern New England Landcare staff report three resourcing trends with respect to landcare:

1. Less funding is available for delivery of on- ground works though landcare networks;
2. Stewardship activities of rural land managers and the co-ordinating role of landcare networks are un-valued or under-valued; and
3. Transaction costs are increasing.

Network staff have noticed a decline in funds for landholders to undertake on-ground environmental works, and for the landcare network to perform its facilitation role. In the 1990s, the organisation was funded for a generalist landcare co-ordinator. As its experience and reputation grew, it reached a staffing high-point (2008-09) of two and a half paid full-time equivalent staff members (2.5 FTE) in general landcare co-ordinator positions and specific project staff. This staffing reflected the demand for services. Southern New England Landcare estimates that 2.5 to 3 FTE paid co-ordinator staff are needed to support local work, compared with the current support of just 0.75 FTE.

Generalist landcare co-ordination suffers

Reduced staff and increasing time pressures on remaining staff limit the ability to provide support for the network’s constituent groups. These constraints also limit interaction with the general public and ‘off the street’ enquiries. Furthermore, funding for landcare networks and groups rarely allows for staff time to organise the next round of applications.

Lost opportunities for continuous improvement

Southern New England Landcare staff report declining contact with counterparts in local government and other voluntary organisations servicing neighbouring districts, such as GLENRAC, GwyMac, and Granite Borders Landcare. This has flow-on effects on the capacity for peer-to-peer sharing of information.

Strategic planning & collaborations delayed

Strategic planning and collaborations are essential to effectively manage environmental issues such as biodiversity decline and the integrity of interconnected waterways and wetlands. These activities suffer because of time pressures given insufficient staff.

Unrealised potential

Less funds for landcare networks and increased complexity of administrative processes means that staff must limit where they can provide support. Southern New England Landcare staff estimate that in the last two or three years, up to 95% of stewardship projects that members expressed interest in are not developed into applications, because of limited staff time and uncertainty of success. Despite this, there is an untapped potential of landholders and volunteers to do more:

“Massive will to do stuff if there were funds to do it.”

Risks of false economising

Under-funding stewardship can undermine the benefits from prior investment, affecting the tangible outcomes of stewardship, such as revegetation, weed control, and erosion control. These are long-term endeavours requiring attention for many years beyond the funding timeframe or agreed commitment. Intangible outcomes are also at risk, including community capacity, pro-stewardship social networks, knowledge, and organisational skills. These take time to develop, but can be lost without sustained support.

Alternative sources?

The search for a reliable funding stream is perpetual. Southern New England Landcare has tried crowd-sourcing, but this requires staff resources to develop and provide feedback, ‘rewards’, and incentives to individual donors who may donate relatively small cash amounts. A major problem in community donation funding is that too much time must be devoted to small opportunities with uncertain success rates, and high transaction costs.

2. Un-valued, under-valued, & need for better valuing

Network staff speculated whether urban-based policymakers, and funding administrators appreciate the value of frontline volunteers performing rural stewardship activities, and the value of intermediaries such as Southern New England Landcare. They believe that there is an inadequate appreciation of the complexity and intricacy of the stewardship task of rural land managers – i.e. protecting the environment, including restoring past degradation, while managing productive farms in an unrelenting commercial economy that does not reward good environmental management.



(Image courtesy of www.snelandcare.org.au)

Private contributions dwarf public funds available

This lack of appreciation leads to under-valuing the contribution of rural land stewards. Governments use media to promote their contributions to public funding, which is appreciated by landcare networks and groups. But far less is said about the significant amounts that good stewards contribute in cash and kind, which is far more than the public moneys invested.

Intangible value for rural communities

The physical and mental health benefits of belonging to a network or group and engaging together in positive activities are part of the value. Rural land stewards draw on and build functioning communities:

“We really have to add in the mental health and physical health and wellbeing of rural communities on top of that value that as well! When you get the landcare model right, when landcare works well, it cares for people as well. The value is huge.”

Funding rules perpetuate under-value

The rules for funding reflect the value governments place on contributions by community members. The substantial time citizens spend preparing funding applications is not recognised, but that work is critical to funding applications and effective execution of projects. Landholders’ contribution to stewardship activities is valued by governments at a standard rate – usually \$20 to \$30 per hour – which is well below a realistic value. A commercial consultant or contractor would charge much more for the specialist input landholders contribute to stewardship grants and projects.

Rural environmental issues not seen as urgent or catastrophic

Reflecting on how voluntary public good activities are valued, the staff compare landcare with rural fire services. Both rely on a voluntary ‘frontline’ workforce, and organisations to co-ordinate activities and shoulder administrative responsibilities. Both draw from rural landholders and volunteers. Southern New England Landcare staff observe that landcare voluntarism has stalled, but rural fire services have seen voluntary membership rise.

Why? Rural fire services are comparatively well-resourced and supported by governments. Bushfires are urgent disasters, and for policy-makers and treasuries, the urgent mission of rural fire services is clear-cut. The slow-moving catastrophes of biodiversity loss, soil degradation, climate change, and community burnout are less urgent and more difficult to “sell” in a narrative that compels political action.



(Image courtesy of www.snelandcare.org.au)

However, Southern New England Landcare staff do sense a change in the political winds, with more and more mainstream recognition of the ways climate change catastrophes will disrupt everyday life for many communities. Given the network’s deep collective knowledge of the local landscape and its human and ecological capacities, as well as decades of experience in community co-ordination, the Landcare Staff envisage a crucial role for the network in developing strategies for ‘future-proofing’ local communities in the face of ongoing natural disasters and changed climate patterns. In this regard, staff referred to a role model in the neighbouring landcare community, where the local community network GLENRAC (Glen Innes Natural Resources Advisory Committee) was financially supported to co-ordinate drought management services.

Untapped value

Southern New England Landcare staff often referred to the untapped potential for citizens to voluntarily contribute more effectively to national stewardship. Staff report that engagement with landcare networks and groups depended on the personal willingness (or unwillingness) of individual government employees. The relationship rises and falls independently of higher level agreements. Nonetheless, the current relationship between Southern New England Landcare and LLS is robust and fruitful.

Sometimes non-government organisations gain the trust of different stakeholders than government, and so can create collaborative opportunities not available to government bodies. Appreciating the range of possible contributions to the public interest delivered by voluntary stewards and their co-ordinating organisations remains a work in progress:

“What value do we get from investing in rural restoration and rural landscapes? We get biodiversity; we get carbon sequestration; we address a lot of mental health issues, which is less tangible. I don’t think we have any concept of the value of doing that. We look at trying to value ecosystem services ... We are so behind the eight ball. ... We hardly have the mechanisms in place to place an actual value on those things.”

No mechanism for converting experience into continuous improvement

The end-of-project reports that funded organisations and individuals prepare for funders are under-used. Southern New England Landcare staff expressed scepticism about what happens to project reports and ‘monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement’ (MERI) documents. Staff recounted an anecdote from much earlier in the network’s history about a staff member visiting the NSW State Government office responsible for these reports:

“A pile three foot high of final reports – and ours was in it – and it was being used as a door stopper in Macquarie Street. No-one ever read them. They demanded them and you didn’t get your next lot of money until you’d submitted your final report.”

Staff were unable to point to evidence that governments make systematic use of the accumulated experience from hundreds of funded projects. But they believe governments should be learning from that rich experience in a disciplined way.

3. Increasing transaction costs

Southern New England Landcare staff noted that funding application processes are increasingly onerous. They recalled that government funding processes once seemed more consultative and willing to accommodate local networks and groups. Funding rounds were more user-friendly. Landholders completed the application for group projects (rarely individual projects) in a once-a-year process. Landcare staff would review and suggest improvements before submission. Most applications were successful – typically, if 25 applications were submitted, 18 would be funded.

Application processes more complex, more demanding, less user-friendly

Now the processes is more prescriptive in imposing pre-determined objectives, and less flexible in accommodating local concerns. The application process continues all year, and it takes far more staff time to complete a smaller number of applications, with a lower success rate:

“You’ve got people with PhDs and Honours trying to fill out impossible forms and spending weeks doing it, and it doesn’t get up”

Any government streamlining of the processes – e.g. through online applications – seems to focus on improving the ‘back-end’ functions that enhance government’s reporting, rather than on creating ‘front-end’ user-friendly systems. Transaction costs are transferred to community organisations:

“Basically what they ended up doing is transferring down to us their workload, their responsibilities.”

As well as increased complexity in the application process, the expectations on project proponents have become more demanding, with more milestones and reporting conditions. Southern New England Landcare typically has funded projects running concurrently with diverse objectives, funded by a variety of public and private organisations, at differing stages in the project lifecycle. To meet the accountability challenges, the organisation has invested in business software to maintain its database and keep abreast of project milestones. Similarly, as mentioned above, the network has been

able to grow its governance capacities by offering directors the opportunity to round-out their resumes and build their skills base in directorship duties. This is important in small communities, where community leaders are called on to apply their leadership skills across a range of community organisations.

Staff expressed some frustration with the perceived lack of understanding and micro-managing of metropolitan-based administrators. The rolling sequence of challenges over the last few years – drought, bushfire, pandemic, and storms – has created a very stressful environment, which has tested the capacities – financial, mental, and emotional – of on-ground landcarers, community volunteers as well as network staff and leaders. If Australia is to rely on land stewards operating in such an environment, stewardship funding models must be flexible enough to accommodate these stresses.



(Image courtesy of www.snelandcare.org.au)

CONSEQUENCES

Southern New England Landcare staff report that the convergence of these issues has seen a loss of community motivation for stewardship work, where once there was massive enthusiasm. Staff are concerned about the growing burden placed on the declining set of community members who take on voluntary leadership roles.

Flagging energy

Staff have noticed tiredness among on-ground stewards. The New England Tablelands of NSW is distinctly rural, but staff have noticed a shift towards tackling urban issues in the town of Armidale. Voluntarism needs a regular ‘workforce’, as well as finances and network connections. These tend to coalesce in larger towns and urban centres, and so projects are more feasible and more likely to satisfy funding body expectations. The impacts of drought, fires, storms and Covid have sapped rural volunteers’ time, finances, and mental and emotional capacities:

“It’s all the other pressures on them that take a higher priority than making sure that tree-planting goes into the ground this week.”

The Landcare staff predict this will only get worse:

“The more we get drought, climate change, and climate extreme events, the more difficult it is going to be to engage people”.

Enthusiasm is further eroded by: *“the amount of bureaucratic BS that farmers have to deal with on a daily basis.”*



(Image courtesy of www.snelandcare.org.au)

The rationale to have a dedicated organisation with paid staff to shoulder some of the administrative and governance tasks is compelling. This allows land stewards to focus on on-ground tasks and reap the mental health and wellbeing benefits, while optimising the value to the public interest.

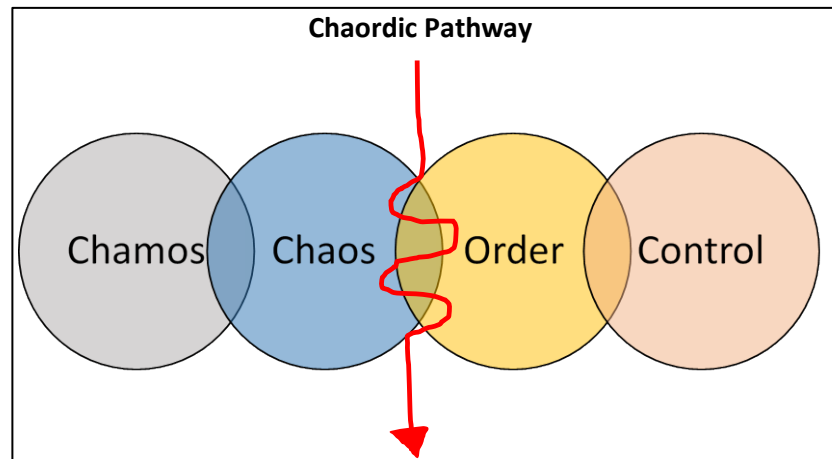
Community burn-out

In rural communities, there is a relatively limited pool of people to perform leadership roles – and this includes Southern New England Landcare and its constituent groups. The same few landcare members take on the leadership roles that drive group activities. When resourced adequately, the network can support these leaders by relieving administrative burdens and streamlining communications. Otherwise, the time and mental and emotional energy invested by unpaid community leaders can lead to burnout, especially given the stresses of seasonal conditions and commodity markets. Networks such as Southern New England Landcare are important to lighten the load for leaders in voluntary stewardship.

THE WAY AHEAD ...

Is the future 'chaordic'?

Despite the enormous challenges and stresses over the past few years, Southern New England Landcare staff remain upbeat about the value of the work of the network and its potential to play a stronger role in helping local people 'own' local problems and find solutions. Over the more than three decades of operation, the network has honed its professional expertise in facilitation and regularly supports staff to keep up-to-date with latest facilitation trends and innovations. One staff member recalled a training session in recent years organised by training firm Campfire Co-op, which explored the open access facilitation style called 'The Art of Hosting'. This event introduced staff to the 'chaordic pathway' metaphor, which typically visualises human-ecological systems along a continuum of four overlapping states or spheres.



The two outer spheres at the extremes of the spectrum represent 'Chamos' – the total destruction and breakdown of group and individual efficacy – and 'Control', in which externalised autocracy removes personal and collective agency. Both extremes are to be avoided. In the middle ground of the spectrum are 'Chaos' and 'Order'. Both can be useful, but are potential stepping stones to Chamos and Control respectively. Order provides space for clarity and reflection, but with too much order, systems become stale, complacent and tend towards 'Control'. Chaos provides the opportunity for creativity and blue-sky thinking, but with too much chaos, systems lose coherence and tend towards 'Chamos'. The skill of facilitation or 'the art of hosting' is to help communities manage, cope with, and adapt to profound change and disruption by navigating the intersecting space between Chaos and Order (the 'chaordic' path), and avoid the extremes.

This metaphor resonates with staff as a way of imagining how to apply their professional facilitation skills in helping their community adjust to looming environmental and social risks and threats. They remain confident that within local rural communities there exists the potential and social capital to self-organise, learn from the past, re-shape what they have learnt, and adapt in the face of an uncertain future. Properly resourced landcare networks and adequate investment in land stewards will be pivotal in this journey.