

Landcare: Policy, Practice and Partnerships

Landcare is a response to the land degradation crisis facing Australia and is both a community process and a government policy. 'Landcare' is a contested term with different meanings being placed on it by individuals and groups from different places with different levels of power and local knowledge. A key concept of Landcare is forming partnerships, which are also seen in very different terms by various Landcare stakeholders. Landcare places great value on local environmental knowledge and senses of place. The achievements of Landcare in facilitating cultural change are assessed and the factors identified that will determine whether Landcare can be 'scaled up' to address wider issues of ecological sustainability.

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Introduction

This paper illustrates how cultural geography can be part of an applied geography that constructively addresses one of the most important issues facing Australian society - land degradation. Landcare is a community based movement supported by a formal government policy developed to address the land degradation crisis facing Australia. One achievement of Landcare has been to redefine how a large proportion of rural Australians see their landscape. Cultural geography has a particular relevance to the examination of how environmental lobbies 'are forging new ways of seeing and relating to nature' (Anderson and Gale, 1992:1-2). A major challenge facing Landcare is the contested meanings associated with both 'Landcare' and the key concept of 'partnerships'. In this context the interest of cultural geographers in the role of place, power and local knowledge in constructing how different groups see the world is very relevant.

Other points of intersection between cultural geography and Landcare relate to common methods and concerns. In terms of methods the 'reading the landscape' approach used by Landcare to raise community awareness of environmental issues mirrors a process cultural geographers have long practised. In terms of common concerns Landcare places great emphasis on the value of local knowledge and local senses of place. These local senses of place are often an important factor in determining the geographic area of interest of each Landcare group. This paper outlines the successes of Landcare in achieving cultural change, and it examines whether local issues and grass roots Landcare activities can be scaled up to provide the broader approaches required to meet Landcare's lofty goals of achieving in Australia 'by the year 2000, ecologically sustainable land use through the management of land degradation' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991:vii).

This study is based on extensive contact with Landcare groups in south-east Australia between 1993 and 1996, much of this through supervision of student research projects on Landcare issues. These projects have generally been collaborative research projects carried out in close liaison with Landcare groups (Baker, 1996). Fieldwork has included attending numerous public meetings and field days, as well as interviews with key individuals. During this period I have also had considerable contact with senior bureaucrats in the federal government departments involved in Landcare and with the Murray-Darling Basin

Commission and the National Farmers' Federation. An interest in documenting how individuals culturally construct their views of the environment has underpinned this research.

Methods

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Land degradation in Australia

Australia faces a land degradation crisis whose social and economic impacts could be immense. A recent survey by the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE, 1995) found that more than 60 per cent of farmers surveyed had a significant land degradation problem. For example, huge areas of Australia will go out of production in the next few decades unless rapidly rising saline water tables can be reversed. A recent Prime Ministerial statement put the cost of land degradation at \$1.5 billion per annum (Gretton and Salma, 1996:xi). There is, however, nothing new about land degradation in Australia. Since the European invasion inappropriate imported land uses have rapidly altered our landscape. The history of failed policy attempts to deal with land degradation is nearly as old (Powell 1976; 1993). Public policy responses to land and water degradation have nearly always been after-the-event attempts to address symptoms rather than causes.

The technical-scientific model of addressing land degradation has clearly failed because it has ignored so many of the cultural factors that need to be addressed. As social scientists working in developing countries have long pointed out land degradation is as much about 'social processes as physical ones' (Blaikie, 1985:50). Landcare has enormous potential to address the land degradation crisis because it addresses many of these social processes. It recognises that the necessary remedies will not materialise unless landowners are committed to ensuring that they are implemented. Past approaches to addressing land degradation based on technical-scientific approaches with narrow and simplified visions of biophysical problems have disempowered landholders by creating the view that land degradation is a 'government' problem rather than an issue for farmers to respond to themselves. Academic research has played a major part in perpetuating simplistic policy approaches, focussing on the harsh physical realities of our soils and climates at the expense of analysing social processes. While soil conservation organisations in Australia have developed great expertise in treating the symptoms of land abuse they have achieved little to change the cultural processes responsible for on-going land degradation.

In the last decade, supported by federal government and state government policy and funding, Landcare members around Australia have voluntarily devoted a huge amount of their time and energy to identify steps by which the land degradation crisis can be addressed. Landcare groups have successfully raised awareness of land degradation issues through demonstration days and trial plots. Some have done their farm and catchment planning, and are now

embarking on ambitious regional planning exercises. There is however, growing frustration among Landcare members who have identified what needs to be done but do not have the resources to carry it out.

What is Landcare?

Landcare walks an uneasy path. Critics on one side say it is too radical, and that it threatens the basis of rural Australia. On the other side some say that it is not radical enough and claim that it is a 'business as usual' solution, not making fundamental changes to a system of agriculture unsuited to the Australian environment. The dual origin of Landcare as a community movement and a government policy has resulted in the term having a number of meanings. While there is general agreement that Landcare is about people coming together to form partnerships to care for the land, misunderstandings abound as individuals and groups often define Landcare from their particular points of view. Opinions range between Landcare being about economic sustainability (just looking after the land to the point of maintaining economic production) to Landcare being just about ecological sustainability.

Each of the following elements has at times been described as 'Landcare':

1. community groups working towards sustainable land management,
2. government policy aimed at assisting these groups meet their aims,
3. a bureaucracy involved in the implementation of this policy,
4. a land care ethic.

Rather than argue about which of these meanings is Landcare, it is much more productive to regard Landcare as the sum of all these four things. The concept of 'partnerships' is fundamental to each of the first three meanings of Landcare. Significantly, however, even this term has quite different meanings within each of these three contexts. The contested meanings of 'Landcare' and the contested nature of 'partnerships' will be made apparent. Conflicts that arise out of contrasts in place, power, and local knowledge will also be highlighted.

1) Landcare Groups: People and Place

In the last decade there has been an extraordinary growth in the number of Landcare groups in Australia (Fig. 1). It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Landcare groups as it is a voluntary movement and there is no requirement for groups to register with the relevant state agencies. Recent estimates from the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy suggest that in August 1996 there were about 3,000 groups (Australia, 1996). An estimate of 2,800 was given in early 1996 by the Executive Director of the National Farmers' Federation (Craik, 1996:41). These most recent figures indicate a growth rate over the last three years of about 400 new groups a year and showing no signs of slowing.

Figure 1: Growth in Landcare groups, 1985 to 1994



Source: Alexander, 1995

Community based Landcare groups began to form in the early to mid-1980s in response to local environmental problems, primarily, but not exclusively, in Victoria and Western Australia. In Victoria Land Care groups (as they were then called) tended to grow out of pre-existing Farm Tree Groups and in Western Australia they evolved out of Land Conservation District Committees (Campbell and Seipen, 1994:24-29). Landcare groups typically consist of a committee which organises activities to raise awareness of issues related to the use of land and water resources. Issues are diverse and include, for example, weeds, feral animals, water quality, soil erosion, soil structure decline, salinity and rising water tables. Landcare has provided a vehicle for local cooperative responses to these problems with land holders, for example, working together to control pest animal and weeds. Tree planting aimed at controlling erosion and lowering water tables has also been a major activity of many Landcare groups. Sher and Sher (1994:3) argue that our past tendency to ignore 'the tremendous diversity of the nation's rural people, communities, and economies' has resulted in inappropriate policies and programs. In the Landcare context, graziers and crop growers, for example, have different ways of looking at their landscapes as a result of differences in the nature of their farming. In turn, these different ways of seeing play an important role in determining the outlook of the Landcare groups established by each.

Most Landcare groups rely entirely on the voluntary labour of their members but a few groups have obtained funding for paid coordinators to help organise activities such as field days and on-ground works. Coordinators are quite distinct from another player in Landcare - the facilitators. As the chair of the Molyullah Tatong Tree and Landcare Protection Group put it: 'a facilitator is a government employed person with a big car who starts Landcare groups and a coordinator is a dogsbody owned by a particular group' (Bill Willett 1996, speaking at the Australian National University - Community Forum on Landcare, Warrenbayne Community Hall, 26 April). A major function of either position is communicating between the group and government. But as far as the group is concerned the coordinator does this from the position of being 'one of us' while the facilitator is 'one of them'.

The federal government has created programs for funding community-based Landcare projects. The guidelines for these funds to date have had a heavy emphasis on demonstration projects with a major educational role. At present two federal departments administer these grants (the Department of Environment, Sport and Territories and the Department of Primary Industry and Energy). There is now a so-called One Stop Shop where Landcare groups put in funding applications that are considered by programs administered by both departments. A hierarchy of assessment panels assess these grant applications. Applications from community groups go to community-based regional assessment panels. Recommendations from these go to a state assessment panel and their recommendations go to the federal government for final

approval. At the state level there has always been a community chair but relevant state departments are also represented. There has been community input from the beginning for community grants but now this is also happening for the state-commonwealth component, giving communities a say on how state agencies spend their money.

Many Landcare groups started because pressing local land degradation problems clearly required cooperative action. Campbell and Seipen (1994:29) noted that it was no coincidence that many early groups formed in areas with rising saline watertables.

When you have a rising tide of salty ground water beneath your farm, it is obvious that: (a) you need to act, and (b) you cannot solve the problem unless other people act, so that cooperative efforts at a catchment or district level are essential.

Major and obvious environmental problems provide an important focus for both the establishment of Landcare groups and for their on-going viability. In some areas where Landcare groups are struggling to attract wide membership I have heard Landcare leaders bemoan the lack of a major problem which could act as a catalyst to bring people together.

In some cases the motivation for group formation was not related to newly perceived environmental problems, but to the bureaucratic responses to problems. For example, the stimulus in the Walwa area (upper Murray region of Victoria) was not so much a reaction to an environmental crisis but to the perceived waste of money from an uncoordinated response to gully erosion caused by severe storms in 1991. Locals described how they were horrified by the number of people who came in 'throwing money at the problem and not talking to us' (Rodney Wolter, Walwa Landcare President, 1995, pers. comm., 25 April). To the community Landcare means being involved in identifying and describing the problem, in defining solutions and in implementing them.

Community based Landcare is a bottom-up response to the challenge of specific environmental problems and is therefore locally grounded. It is driven by principles of community participation and empowerment. It places great value on local knowledge and the communication of this knowledge. It is a radical challenge to the traditional model which involved the government expert telling locals what to do. Because of the success of Landcare and the restructuring of state government rural agencies the traditional, usually male, extension officer who visited properties to dispense scientific advice with the full authority of the government and science behind him has virtually disappeared. Instead today, in most rural areas of Australia, information is more likely to be shared between farmers at field days, farm walks or discussion meetings cooperatively organised by government staff and Landcare groups (Carr, 1994).

Partnership aptly sums up the emerging relationship between innovative field based government staff and Landcare groups. Former soil conservationists trained in dealing with soils rather than people have found themselves in the role of facilitators with the task of dealing with people rather than soils. The skills required by a group facilitator - for example, the ability to float ideas and to have the humility to stand back to see which ideas (if any) are taken up by Landcare groups - are such that not all staff are coping with these changes. Some are falling back into an 'I am the expert' role, and are not giving groups the independence they require to develop a sense of ownership of their problems. Those ready to make the required changes tend to fall into two categories:

1. recent graduates exposed to models of adult learning and community participation in planning, or,

2. locals with a commitment to the area and an understanding of the social factors that make the community work.

There are strong pressures however working against such people. Graduates from the 'city' are always going to be regarded as 'blow-ins'. Newcomers who do develop a commitment to an area and returning locals face temporary tenures due to the culture of state public services where promotion often necessitates a transfer elsewhere.

Cooperative research projects driven by community concerns are another element of the partnership desired by the community. On-farm research projects, aimed at achieving more sustainable landuses, do not generally receive adequate assistance from the public sector. Large research organisations locked into established rural industries (Alexander, 1995:59) do not generally have the same flexibility as Landcare groups to do research in new areas. There is great scope for Landcare groups and more established organisations to come closer together in community generated but publicly supported research. Benefits would include research that was focussed more on community needs, more rapid implementation of research findings and the potential for community Landcare groups to take more informed action. For example, without detailed geomorphic knowledge there is a danger that Landcare gully 'control activities' could be directed at stabilised gullies instead of identifying and protecting only those areas susceptible to erosion.

The area covered by any given Landcare group is either based on the local group's sense of where their community stops and starts or is based on a pre-existing organisation from which the group has evolved. The two are of course often related, sense of community has already shaped existing organisations. A strong sense of community can often be sustained in small valleys, and it is no coincidence that many successful Landcare groups are to be found in such areas. The valley can not be too big or the sense of human connections is lost. In most areas of Australia, however, biophysical features do not so strongly determine local senses of community. For example the Murray Valley, the Riverina and the rangelands (which make up the majority of the country), are all too big for:

1. everyone within them to know everyone else and
2. for people living in them to be able to see the physical extent of these regions.

In such areas Landcare groups are likely to emerge from existing groups, such as a local football club (Brown, 1995:38) or a tennis club (Carr, 1994:233). Thus, over much of Australia Landcare regions tend to be defined culturally in significant contrast to the catchment management committees (CMCs) that have been established in a number of states and which are, by definition, biophysically defined. Attempts to get Landcare and CMCs to work together are likely to be hampered by this fundamental difference.

The origin of each Landcare group plays an important role in determining the group's composition and likely achievements. In many areas, bushfire brigades are still very much male dominated, Landcare groups evolving out of them are likely to have a very different gender balance to those evolving out of tennis clubs. Some groups have evolved in direct opposition to 'green' agendas. To many conservative farmers Landcare is a 'greenie' plot. Such farmers are typically not members of Landcare. However, as the acceptance of Landcare grows in an area, some do end up joining Landcare, in some cases setting up their own groups. As related by the chair of one NSW Landcare group his group formed because members 'thought we should make sure we got a say. The greenies were getting too much say in what was going on' (Scott, 1996:58). Part of the appeal of Landcare to rural Australians is that unlike 'many environmental or conservational discourses, Landcare provides a place and

role for Australian farmers in environmental management practice' (Lockie, 1995:10). It is revealing to note that Landcare, with members from approximately 30 per cent of all rural properties (Craik, 1996:41), has achieved far greater participation rates than traditional conservation-environmental groups have ever managed in their urban heartlands.

There is a strong correlation between the inclusiveness of a group and the likelihood of it receiving broad community support for proposed activities. Landcare often includes small land holders (Lockie, 1995:5) and women (Brown, 1996:10) who have often been excluded from traditional rural power bases. In some areas this has created a split with these traditional rural power bases. Traditional large-scale farmers may see themselves as 'real farmers' in opposition to 'hobby' farmers who have the time and money (from off-farm incomes) to 'waste' on Landcare. Part of this opposition to 'hobby farmers' is surely a result of urban-rural tensions in Australia. These are tensions which the policy-makers in Landcare need to be particularly conscious of. It should also be stressed that there has been very limited membership of indigenous peoples (Turner, 1994) in Landcare. Aboriginal involvement has generally been focussed on projects run by Aboriginal organisations, on Aboriginal-owned land (Brown, 1996:33).

2) Federal Government Policy Initiative

A formal Landcare policy initiative was launched by Prime Minister Hawke in July 1989 (Hawke, 1989). A funding commitment of \$340 million was made to make the 1990s the Decade of Landcare. In terms of annual allocations this figure has grown substantially since then (Table I). The considerable decrease in allocated funds in 1996-1997 is the result of the finalisation of the three-year specially funded projects announced in the Prime Minister's 1992 environmental policy statement (Keating, 1992). While the current government has promised substantial increases in expenditure in Landcare-related matters (Hill, 1996) this is conditional on raising revenue from the partial privatisation of the national telecommunications provider, Telstra. Proceeds from this sale are to be used to establish a Natural Heritage Trust that will fund various natural resource and environmental management programs. High level talks are occurring between state and federal Landcare officials on how to best utilise such increased funding.

Table I: National Landcare Program Allocation, Main Program Elements (\$m)

Program element	1993-94 allocations	1994-95 allocations	1995-96 allocations	1996-97 allocations
Community component	15.79	15.09	16.30	17.08
Commonwealth / State component	52.15	50.75	56.60	38.60

Source: Department of Primary Industry and Energy

The Decade of Landcare Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991) was the result of agreement between the commonwealth, state and territory ministers responsible for soil conservation. Its focus has been the funding of demonstration projects with a major educational role. The federal government has seen its role as a catalyst, encouraging commitment to Landcare and hoping that funding for actual on-ground works would come from elsewhere, a hope which appears to be wishful thinking. Land owners do not have the

resources needed to resolve the land degradation crisis facing Australia, nor are there signs of any readiness by state governments to provide the necessary funds.

Landcare policy is the direct result of a most effective piece of combined political lobbying by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the National Farmers' Federation (NFF). This alliance, categorised at the time by many as an unholy one (Campbell and Siepen, 1994:30), was forged by the respective executive directors of the ACF and the NFF, Phillip Toyne and Rick Farley. The NFF-ACF proposal (Toyne and Farley, 1989) to the federal government was in large measure adopted as government policy.

As in most successful political lobbying, the timing of the ACF-NFF submission was crucial to its success. A number of critical factors came into alignment in the lead up to the 1990 Federal Election. Of particular importance was the fact that the proposal was attractive to both Prime Minister Hawke and to the Federal Minister for Primary Industry, John Kerin. The fact that Landcare represented an alliance between the peak farmers' body and the peak conservation organisation was obviously very attractive to a consensus-oriented Prime Minister. John Kerin had also long made known his views on the need for coordinated federal and state action on land degradation (Kerin, 1987:1-4). Landcare was also proposed to the federal government as a logical extension to the existing National Soil Conservation Program. However, the soil program at the time was a very small project, with annual funding of only about \$4m. This was at the time about the same as the budget for landscaping the new Parliament House (Campbell and Seipen, 1994:30). An important aspect of the ACF-NFF submission was that it built upon an existing, albeit fledgling, community initiative. The proposal noted the existence of a small number of Land Care groups, as they were then called, and suggested that 1600 such groups were required to cover all of Australia (Toyne and Farley, 1989:6).

A major policy challenge for the federal bureaucracy is how to effectively form partnerships with Landcare groups. The Department of Primary Industry and Energy adopted a proactive response to the problems of Landcare communication by instigating a major consultancy on this topic. This resulted in a 300 page manual Landcare languages (Brown, 1996). Of particular relevance was the conclusion that there is a breakdown in communication between the Landcare bureaucracy and Landcare members. Community Landcare people tend not to go to national and state Landcare conferences, and government officers rarely get to Landcare field days and meetings (Brown 1996:20). Face-to-face contact is fundamental to get over suspicion on both sides, however the small number of federal staff can only visit a fraction of the 3,000 Landcare groups.

3) The Landcare Bureaucracy

Officials from all three spheres of Australian government are involved in Landcare. In the federal sphere public servants are involved in policy development, implementation and some evaluation. Much of the implementation phase involves negotiating with state public servants on how programs are to be implemented. State public servants are typically former extension officers who are assisting in the establishment of Landcare groups and supporting their activities. Local government has so far only played a limited role in Landcare. Some work with Landcare groups to control weeds and erosion while others have provided accommodation and administrative support. Local government could clearly play a much greater role with Local Agenda 21 plans and Integrated Local Area Planning, for example, both providing a useful framework for local government support to Landcare (Brown, 1995:43-44). Local government being community based tends to be more responsive and capable of innovation (Brown et al., 1992:7).

Two federal departments administer Landcare (Department of Environment, Sport and Territories and Department of Primary Industry and Energy). Advocates of Landcare often state that one of its great achievements has been getting these two departments to work more closely together. If Landcare is seriously to address sustainability issues it requires much wider administrative support to involve a whole range of other government programs (Alexander, 1995:76; Hadler, 1996). Vested interests in particular 'bureaucratic empires' however, may doom attempts to form a wider collaborative network.

Another component of the Landcare bureaucracy is formed by two organisations, The National Landcare Advisory Committee (NLAC) and Landcare Australia Limited (LAL). NLAC was established under the Natural Resources Management (Financial Assistance) Act 1992 (Cwlth) to make recommendations on natural resource management to the federal Ministers for Primary Industry and Energy and Environment, Sport and Territories. NLAC has members drawn from Landcare, farming, Aboriginal, conservation and state/territory and local government groups. It provides advice on national strategic directions and policy priorities (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995:17).

LAL is a company established to raise funds from the business community and to raise awareness of Landcare. In turn it has formed the Landcare Foundation to encourage and manage Landcare donations. Corporate sponsorship has been given by companies as diverse as Telecom/Telstra, BP, McDonald's, Alcoa, Fuji Xerox, Placer Pacific and Uncle Toby's. Another sponsor is the maker of a herbicide used in alarming quantities by many Landcare groups to control weeds. For companies wanting a clean green product image an association with Landcare is clearly a very attractive strategy. LAL has run a most effective media campaign and Landcare awareness (defined as a positive response to the question 'have you heard of Landcare') reached 66 per cent of all adult Australians by 1995 (LAL, 1995). They are currently on track to beat their stated aim of achieving 80 per cent awareness by July 1997. The strategy of raising awareness of the term 'Landcare' is based on the hope that it will lead to the eventual widespread adoption of a new land caring ethic. The underlying assumption that awareness of the term Landcare is going to lead individuals to take action is clearly a great leap of faith.

Community Landcare groups are calling for a fairer partnership with the Landcare bureaucracy. There has been criticism of both the organisations discussed above because community Landcare groups have little sense of ownership of either (Alexander, 1995:51). The very success of Landcare (in terms of numbers of groups), however, makes personal contact between federal officers and individual Landcare members increasingly difficult. The long time coordinator of one of Victoria's pioneer Landcare groups noted the ease with which he was able to establish good working relationships with senior federal Landcare bureaucrats when his group was just one of a handful in Australia (Angus Howell, 1996, pers. comm., 27 April). Now that there are around 3,000 groups the opportunities for such one to one contact are obviously more limited.

Community Landcare groups require support from government in funding, coordination, communication and research. However a major impediment to partnerships between community Landcare groups and the Landcare bureaucracy lies in the distrust in rural Australia of 'the government'. While excellent cooperative working relationships have been established between many Landcare groups and Landcare officers these are often tempered by a deep distrust. Many community Landcare members have a general unease about having anything to do with 'the government' (a term that can encompass politicians and bureaucrats working in both federal and state governments). Government is seen in rural Australia as

remote, inconsistent and is blamed for creating many of the environmental problems that they are now trying to address.

Landholders are very ready to point out the irony of current government controls on vegetation clearance and policies encouraging tree planting when until very recently taxation concessions encouraged such clearance. Many other former rural policies have contributed to land degradation including fertiliser subsidies that encouraged over application and water-pricing mechanisms that encouraged over use. Likewise, various land-use practices have been extended beyond their sustainable ecological limits as a result of interventionary commodity pricing policies and inappropriate drought relief measures (Messer, 1987:237). Perceived inconsistencies in past policies have spawned deep-rooted suspicion about 'the government's' motives. Some farmers view Landcare as a plot to take away their land (Brown, 1996:14) and there is also great scepticism about the state and federal government's long term commitment to Landcare (Brown, 1996:20).

Blame for past policy failures has become culturally embedded, and the past policy mistakes have created a legacy of mistrust. This is a point stressed by the National Farmers' Federation. Their Executive Director stated (Craik, 1996:38) that the 'NFF strongly believe that current policy fails to recognise the policy mistakes of the past'. The crucial thing is for lessons to be drawn from the past. In particular it should be noted that all the policies mentioned above were developed within narrow policy frameworks which gave no consideration to ecological impacts.

4) A land care ethic

The united aim of all three of the above aspects of Landcare is to encourage a community-wide stewardship ethic for the Australian landscape. Many farmers have been keen to point out to me that they have always had a land ethic and have therefore always been doing land care (see also Lockie, 1995:7). Many, in talking about 'doing land care', refer to any activity they carry out that is directed towards 'looking after the land'. Such assertions are often deliberate attempts to distance themselves from 'government Landcare'. The reality, however, is that the 'land care' practised in the past has clearly not been enough to stop unsustainable land use practices.

Landcare's achievements: Landcare as an agent of cultural change

Landcare's achievements to date have largely been social. The lack of on ground achievements is justifiably causing growing frustration. The mood is aptly captured in the title of the 1994 National Landcare Conference --- Landcare in the Balance. At that conference the federal parliament Greens MP, Bob Brown, summed up these frustrations claiming Landcare was a 'triumph of publicity over outcomes and advertising over actions' (Lockie, 1995:6). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that bringing about cultural change is a notable achievement in itself, and that this change is a necessary precondition, but certainly no guarantee, for redressing land degradation in Australia.

By acknowledging local concerns about, and knowledge of, the environment, Landcare has in a short time achieved remarkable cultural change in rural Australia. To the consternation of some officials who sense a loss of control, Landcare has become a vital social movement. Concern about the state of the environment is no longer the preserve of so called 'greenies'. Landcare has legitimised the concerns which many rural Australians have long had about land

degradation by providing a forum with wide community support in which they can express their ideas. One indication of the magnitude of the cultural change brought about by Landcare is the number of such community forums now being held. Most Landcare groups meet one evening a month, so (based on the figure of 3,000 groups) on any given evening about 100 meetings are held in rural Australia to discuss local environmental issues. A decade ago no one would have considered it possible to generate such an interest in environmental issues in rural Australia. As each group would also hold on average about two field days a year, about 15 field days being held on any given day in Australia.

Field days typically consist of groups walking around each others' farms to develop (in the Landcare jargon) 'land literacy skills'. These 'reading the landscape' walks teach landowners to read the warning signs of emerging environmental damage and to share ideas on how to address these problems. The complexity and depth of farmer knowledge of their own farms provides significant opportunities for monitoring the state of local environments. White (1996:216) has outlined a wide range of 'land literacy' indicators that farmers can use to read the environmental health of their land. Smell can be one of these.

Unusual smells, or smells at an unusual season, can indicate a change in the pattern of development of the land. For example, earlier than normal flowering of ti-tree can indicate lower soil moisture at depth and therefore the need to sow crops earlier or use deep-rooted crops or pasture (White, 1996:216).

Other examples of land literacy innovation include the aerial flights organised by the Victorian Farmers' Federation which enable farmers to see their region from the air at strategic times of the year when salinity is most visible. 'Reading the land' festivals (White, 1996:217-218) are another example. 'Reading the landscape' tapes have also been produced, aimed at giving motorists driving on the Hume Highway between Melbourne and Sydney an understanding of the landscapes they are passing through (Campbell and Siepen, 1994:109-112). The National Museum of Australia in association with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission developed a major travelling exhibition on reading the landscape (Baker and Lane, 1993). Reading of landscapes is an approach strongly advocated by cultural geographers (Sauer, 1956 and Meinig, 1979). An important component of walking around each others' farms, and of openly discussing land degradation problems, is the encouragement of 'mutual accountability' (Lockie, 1995:8). A partnership is created where openness about problems is matched by a sharing of ideas on how to address them.

Landcare groups 'are creating a culture in which it is acceptable, even expected, to consider sustainability issues' (Alexander, 1995:14). It has also created a social climate where people feel comfortable talking about land degradation problems on their own land and seeking suggestions on solutions from neighbours. Landcare members are not only more aware of land degradation issues but also have 'significantly higher levels of adoption of almost all best bet [land management] practices' (Curtis and DeLacy, 1996:134). Community based Landcare has clearly provided the means to go beyond merely identifying the issues by providing a culture in which landowners can make the first tentative steps towards actively addressing local land degradation.

In some areas of Australia (for example, north-east Victoria), 70 per cent of land holders are now members of Landcare (Curtis *et al.*, 1993). Such levels of participation dwarf involvement in organisations more traditionally associated with rural Australia such as the Returned Servicemen's League and the Country Women's Association. Indeed, in some communities Landcare has become the central community focus replacing these more traditional alliances (Carr, 1994). It has also shown the success of public participation in a

way that has encouraged both governments and the public to support the growth of a whole range of other carer groups (e.g. Soilcare, Bushcare, Parkcare, Rivercare, Dunecare, [Koala] Bearcare and Fishcare). A range of community land literacy programs have also developed (e.g. Drain watch, Watertable watch and Salt Watch, Worm watch, Bird watch, Frog watch). A recent report suggests that in Australia there are now between 150,000 and 200,000 people involved in activities broadly defined as community environmental monitoring (Alexandra *et al.*, 1996:16).

While Landcare has been successful in achieving these cultural changes, at current funding levels it clearly does not have the resources to translate this into its lofty goal of achieving 'ecologically sustainable land use' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991:vii). This lack of resources was explicitly acknowledged by the conservative Coalition parties in the lead up to the March 1996 federal election. Their agricultural policy statement made particularly strong statements on the inadequacies of the then Labor Government's funding for Landcare, and they pledged greatly increased funding.

Quite simply, the financial resources necessary to stabilise and ameliorate land and water degradation are not forthcoming Government support for Landcare is insufficient Government must show leadership. It must make a greater contribution both directly and by giving landholders the financial tools needed to move to a sustainable production base (Liberal-National Party, 1996:7).

This 'leadership' noted above is contingent on the partial privatisation of the national telecommunications provider. To date, there has been a decrease in allocations to Landcare.

Scaling Landcare up?

This paper has argued that Landcare is making tentative steps towards addressing local land degradation in Australia. There are calls, however, for Landcare to go beyond addressing local land degradation issues and to be 'scaled up' to play a greater role in broader national agenda such as the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (Alexander, 1995:78). 'Sustainability', however, is an often stated but very poorly defined goal. For some it is synonymous with ecological sustainability and to others it is about economic sustainability. Perhaps a more appropriate term, but one rarely used outside academic circles, is 'sustainable development'. Popularised by the Brundtland Report (World Commission on the Environment and Development, 1990) it attempts to integrate ecological and economic concerns. Table II presents a very simplified schematic of Landcare in relation to issues of soil erosion which it has scaled up from, and with issues of sustainability, which some are arguing Landcare should be scaled up to.

Table II: Scaling up?

Issues	Government departments Geographic area of concern involved	Geographic area of concern
Soil erosion	Soil Conservation Service	Individual farm
Land degradation	State Agriculture, Water and Land Depts. Federal Dept. of Primary Industry and Environment	Culturally defined area of Landcare groups - regional groupings of Landcare groups
'Sustainability'	Whole of government approach required	Regions - the nation - the planet

The sphere of Landcare is firmly situated in the central part of the diagram. In the past there has been a tendency to focus on single issues like soil erosion and direct extension efforts at individual landholders. Landcare, by moving beyond the soil erosion brief, has 'scaled up' in terms of issues and the range of government departments involved, and geographic areas of concern. As such, Landcare is evolving in a way that has the potential to promote a regional vision of sustainability. It does not follow, however, that Landcare can achieve this on its own. Moving towards 'sustainability' is a daunting challenge. It is useful to identify some issues which arise out of the hope that Landcare might be able to scale up beyond local land degradation issues.

A number of Landcare groups have formed voluntary regional groupings to try and coordinate their activities. This trend in conjunction with the Landcare regional assessment committees is resulting in the establishment of some 'grass-roots' regional structures in Australia. At the same time, all three spheres of Australian government have been establishing their 'own regional programs, organisations and boundaries for their own purposes without regard for or even, at times knowledge of what already exists' (Campbell, 1996:4). The following regional organisations for example have been established:

- Local government initiated Voluntary Regional Organisations of Councils (VROC's)
- State initiated Regional Development Commissions or Boards
- Commonwealth initiated labour market programs drawing on 60 Area Consultative Committees (ACC) (Campbell, 1996:5).

Government attempts to set up regional organisations are fundamentally different from the moves towards regional groupings that are emerging from the community. Campbell (1996:3) explored this issue in great detail and referred to the bottom-up tendency as regionalism and the top-down one as regionalisation:

Regionalism is about autonomy and identity at a regional level, and about 'scaling up' to better engage with particular environmental and social issues, driven from below. Regionalisation is about central governments achieving efficiencies and effectiveness by concentrating program delivery at the regional scale, usually while retaining financial control and hence program control.

The emerging grass-roots trend of Landcare groups banding together is a good example of regionalism.

If governments impose regional alliances on community Landcare it will undermine Landcare's ethics of community ownership. The challenge for policy makers interested in encouraging regionalism is akin to the challenge for former extension officers who now find themselves as facilitators. The policy makers need to be sensitive to local structures and rather than imposing the outcomes they want. They need to understand and support the community processes operating in Landcare that are working towards regionalism. Regional structures that emerge in this manner are likely to 'scale up' Landcare's local strengths to regional strengths. Regional structures based on community senses of region, those which are community owned and based on community knowledge, have more potential to promote a regional vision of sustainability than the multitude of government imposed regional groupings.

Conclusions

Landcare's dual origins (as a bottom-up community movement and a top-down government initiative) is simultaneously its great strength and source of many of the problems facing it. On the positive side it provides a unique opportunity for integration of local concerns with a nation-wide coordinated and strategic framework for dealing with sustainability issues. On the negative side it means that there are many tensions within Landcare that need to be addressed if Landcare is to achieve its considerable potential. Some of these tensions relate to differing views on what Landcare is, and to different understandings of the nature of partnerships within Landcare. Cultural differences between policy makers and those doing on-ground work need to be acknowledged. In less than a decade, Landcare has achieved an impressive degree of cultural change. This is an important step toward meeting Landcare's ambitious goal of achieving ecologically sustainable land use in Australia. A more sophisticated understanding of the relationships between local environment knowledge, place, and farming practices is necessary. Cultural geography clearly has a role to play here, to increase our understandings of these relationships, and to militate against the continuing development of inappropriate policies.

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