

# **Combining Production and Conservation in the Woody Yaloak Catchment**

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## **Background**

The Woody Yaloak Catchment Group formed in 1993, the joining of four existing landcare groups. The headwaters of the 120,000 ha catchment is on the outskirts of Ballarat and flows about 70 km south. The natural outflow of the Woody Yaloak River is Lake Corangamite, Australia's biggest permanent saline lake. This 23,000 ha water body is recognized for its international wildlife significance. The Corangamite basin is land locked, with an artificial drain diverting water from the Woody Yaloak Catchment away from Lake Corangamite to the Barwon River.

The majority of the land in the Woody Yaloak catchment is privately owned and is used by people who make a living from farming. There are about 220 farmers in the Woody Yaloak Catchment, farming sheep, prime lambs, cattle and winter crops such as cereals and canola. Closer to Ballarat smaller subdivisions exist. It is estimated more than 1000 lifestyle and hobby farmers reside in about 10% of the catchment. There is also about 20,000 ha of public land.

The major natural resource issues are weeds (gorse, spiny rush, serrated tussock), vermin (rabbits and foxes), salinity, wind and water erosion and a lack of vegetation. Tree cover on private land was less than 1% of the catchment in 1993, with more than 700 ha of land salt affected (which was expanding) and 1160 ha of gully and sheet erosion. It is estimated more than 240 tonnes of salt leaves the Woody Yaloak catchment each day.

## **Gaining landholder participation, the key to combining production and conservation**

Appreciating the extent of the environmental issues and the people we have to engage with is critical in understanding the position the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group has taken since 1993.

The task to improve the natural resources in the Woody Yaloak catchment is huge and the cost is much greater than government can meet. Importantly the vast majority of the required work has to be undertaken on private land. This means the landholders need to be willing participants, giving their permission and volunteering their time, expertise and resources to the task. They also need to maintain this commitment for decades if landscape change is to be achieved.

So how does the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group endeavour to enroll landholders and sustain their participation? In 1992 landholders were asked about local natural resource management issues, what they believed were the elements required to get them to participate in rectification works and to continue this involvement over the long term. It was clear the vast majority of landholders understood the landcare issues that confronted them and they were willing to become involved, but lacked the skills, confidence and finances to undertake activities, especially given the volatility with commodity prices. Very few could afford to experiment and have their investment fail. Understandably landholders erred on the side of caution. It became obvious unless we addressed the productivity and profitability issues, we

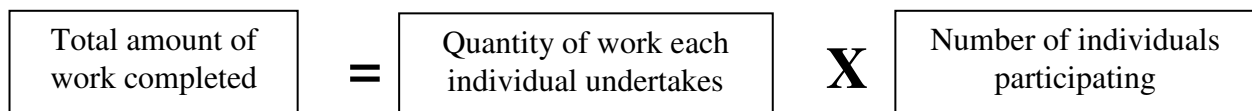
would continually struggle to attract the participation or the quantity investment in natural resource management needed to achieve landscape change.

The Woody Yaloak Catchment Group adopted the catchphrase ‘productive catchment management’ to reflect the need to combine both issues simultaneously. It unashamedly aims to increase the profitability of farm businesses but at the same time actively encourage the investment to improve the natural resources in the catchment.

Our program, whether it relates to productivity or conservation issues, always includes six aspects;

- A planning process that considers the implications of production and conservation actions beyond the boundary fence.
- A skills development program so landholders learn what is required to make an informed decision
- Advice to the individual in the paddock, mainly to re-inforce the actions being taken are the right things to be doing
- Trialing, which allows individuals to test actions on their farm. This develops confidence that the benefits can be achieved on an individuals property
- Financial support, not so much as an incentive but as a means of reducing the financial risk associated with trying something new
- The opportunity to share results through field days and local gatherings.

Understanding the role of participation in achieving landscape change is the cornerstone of our Catchment Project, but we often find this is neglected by those designing or implementing funding programs. The following diagram illustrates the influence we believe an individual can have on shaping landscape outcomes.



Influencing either the quantity of work or the number of individuals participating will alter the total amount of work achieved in our catchment. Often we just focus on getting more people participating, with membership becoming the primary focus. But how much work each of these participants does is probably more important. We embrace the multiplier effect. That is if we can get twice as many people to do twice as much work, there is a four-fold increase in the amount of work completed. By combining production and conservation, we are able to achieve this multiplier effect.

It must be remembered combining production and conservation, the theme of this conference, was a foreign concept in 1992. When the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group adopted productive catchment management, we struggled to gain any support from Government. In fact some within Government were hostile to this approach saying that if there is a productive gain to be made, landholders would do this without any intervention. We see this as a very simplistic approach, as it fails to acknowledge or address the skills, confidence and limited financial resources issues identified by Woody Yaloak landholders in 1992.

Fortunately we were supported by a corporate sponsor in Alcoa. The senior managers in Alcoa understood our desire to address productivity issues and wrote in our second annual report (Nicholson, 1995) that

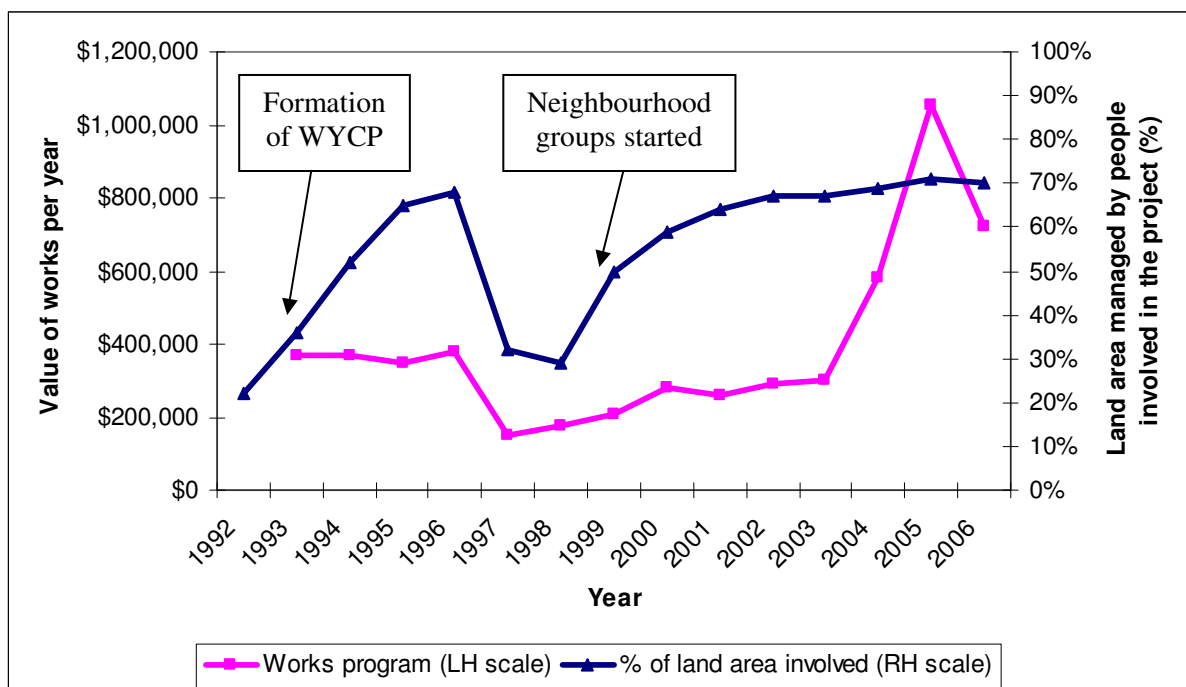
*‘Restoration of Australia’s farm land depends on the landholders being able to afford to carry out costly rehabilitation. Enhanced productivity must be the first aim of any rehabilitation program. Conservation values naturally improve as economic health returns to degraded farm lands’.*

The initial four year sponsorship deal with Alcoa was worth \$450,000 and enabled the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group to begin implementing their philosophy of productive catchment management. Alcoa are still our sponsors after 14 years and have recently signed a further three year agreement.

### Results since 1993

Active participation in the Woody Yaloak Catchment has grown from about 20% of the catchment area in 1992 to 70% (more than 150 landholders), with more than 90% of landholders being involved at some time in the history of the project. This level of participation means works are being carried out on the majority of landholders in the catchment each year.

Contributions to the project have been more than \$7.68 million with 61% of these contributions coming from landholders. Last year was our second highest level of investment in the 14 year history of the project and we maintained participation, despite the worst drought any one can remember (figure 1). About one third of this total investment over the course of the project has been towards increasing farm productivity and business profitability.



**Figure 1:** Annual value of on ground works and landholder participation

The ability to attract this level of investment from landholders is a reflection of the range of production and conservation projects that any one individual can undertake in any year. It is also a product of the innovative planning approach we use called neighbourhood groups, where neighbouring landholders work together to plan and implement a range of across farm boundary works (Clarke, 2006).

The impact on farm productivity has been significant. An independent audit in 2002 showed productivity from farms in the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project had risen from 20% below district average to 10% above district average (Nicholson & Knight, 2004). Key productivity indicators included a 33% increase in the area sown to perennial pastures, greater use of management practices such as soil testing and minimum tillage, a 51% increase in fertiliser use and improved fencing for rotational grazing. The same audit also found farmers in the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group would be willing to spend \$3,300 in the next year on landcare even if no landcare grant was available. We have no doubt this capacity is linked to the profitability of their business. While a subsequent audit is due in 2011, we believe the capacity of landholders to continue investing significant cash into natural resource projects during a drought as a sign of increased business resilience.

The changes to the natural environment are equally impressive. Tree cover on private land has risen from less than 1% to 3 % of the catchment, more than 150 ha of saline land has been treated, remnant vegetation protected, 100 km of streams fenced and 60 erosion areas rehabilitated.

In 2004 the achievements in landscape changed were recognized when the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group won the National Landcare Catchment award.

### **Is balancing conservation and production a reality or a pipe dream?**

The results presented from the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group would suggest it is possible to enhance both productivity and natural resources simultaneously. In fact we believe there is no other way of achieving landscape change.

I believe our biggest achievement has been in changing the mindset of individual landholders in the catchment. This has stemmed from our initial desire to address their issues the way they wanted them addressed. We believed if we showed an interest in the immediate issues, and helped solve these issues, then over time they would become interested in other aspects of conservation. This has been the case. However it has been a huge task to gain funding from non traditional supporters to enable this engagement with our landholders.

Government, numerous corporate sponsors and agricultural industry groups have all contributed to the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project.

Sadly many programs that aim to support conservation issues fail to recognize the 'you show an interest in me and I'll show an interest in you' aspect of human nature. They design programs with the sole aim of achieving the conservation outcomes they want and with unrealistically short time frames. There is never enough time to build relationships and trust, and the message is simply we want you (the landholder) to adopt what we want. Not surprisingly these programs often achieve disappointing levels of engagement or sustained behavior.

More recently funders who are unhappy with the pace of conservation enhancement have begun limiting investment eligibility to only small parts of the landscape deemed the highest

priority. In our catchment many landholders who have contributed to more than a decade of landcare works, both production and conservation are now ineligible for support. Even more disturbing is that many people responsible with implementing programs that do not meet a desired outcome, come to the conclusion landholders are not interested in their issue. Their common reaction is then to push for greater Government intervention through planning rules and other laws.

In starting on our 15<sup>th</sup> year of landscape change, we are full of optimism but also wary of the direction Government support is going in terms of investment prioritization and regulation. We firmly believe that in the big picture of landscape enhancement, sustained voluntary participation by the majority of landholders, who are willing to invest their own money is likely to lead to the greatest outcome in conservation and biodiversity rather than the narrow, single focused prescriptive programs we have now.

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