

A Journey in Catchment Management Landholder experiences from the Woody Yaloak Catchment

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The Woody Yaloak River catchment covers 120,000 ha and is home to 50 full time and 70 part time farmers. The headwaters of the Woody Yaloak River are on the outskirts of Ballarat and flow 60 km south. The natural outflow of the River is Lake Corangamite, Australia's largest natural permanent inland lake. Lake Corangamite covers 23,000 hectares and is recognised as a lake of international wildlife conservation significance.

The northern half of the catchment consists of steep rolling hills. Soil structure and fertility are generally poor. Further south, the Woody Yaloak River flows through a relatively more fertile basalt plain. Eighty per cent of the land in the catchment is privately owned. There are 20,000 hectares of public land, mainly forests of messmate spring/bark. Softwood plantations and hardwoods for woodchips cover a further 3,000 hectares. Wool, prime lambs, cattle and cereals are the main agricultural commodities.

During the 1980s it became evident to landholders in the catchment that degradation of the natural resource was undermining the productive capacity of the area. Land salting, erosion, vermin and weeds were impacting on agricultural pursuits and reducing farm profitability. In response to these increasing threats, landcare groups began to form. By 1991 there were six landcare groups in the catchment, conducting activities to tackle their various land and water degradation issues.

The evolution into a catchment project started in January 1992. The catalyst for the project was the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) who were encouraging landcare groups to approach their activities on a catchment basis. The VFF also raised the opportunity for a private sponsor to invest in landcare. Discussions were held with key members of the existing landcare groups in the catchment and a public meeting was held to seek guidance on the priority issues and the best way to address them. Enthusiasm among the landholders in the catchment was high.

The overwhelming feedback from the meeting was the vast majority of farmers recognised the landcare issues and understood the need to solve the various problems, but lacked the *skills, confidence or immediate finances* to undertake activities, especially given the prevailing commodity prices. If landcare was to succeed, it was essential the majority of landholders be encouraged to 'have a go' rather than watch neighbours or view demonstration areas.

A FIVE YEAR ACTION PLAN (1993-1997)

The meeting suggested a five year action plan be developed to outline how to bridge the confidence and financial gap. An underlying assumption was that individual success would provide the motivation for on-going adoption of the landcare solutions, especially when part of the program would result in productivity increases that could be invested in later years.

Development of the action plan also allowed the extent of the degradation problem to be assessed on a catchment scale. It revealed more than 900 ha of land salting, 80 km of gully, 2,000 ha of sheet and 00 km of stream erosion. Rabbits, foxes and problem weeds such as bent grass, furze and spiny rush occur throughout the catchment. More than 135,000 tonnes of salt were leaving the catchment each year.

The five year plan focussed on four areas of activities: tree establishment, rabbit eradication, erosion control and pasture improvement. The last area, pasture improvement was aimed at reducing the impact of bent grass and increasing the amount of deep rooted perennial pastures for salinity recharge

control. It also unashamedly sought to increase farm productivity. At that time support, and especially financial incentives through Government, were limited to 'non-productive' activities. Their argument was pasture improvement would have a short-term financial gain and therefore didn't require any monetary assistance to achieve adoption. If it were profitable, farmers in the catchment would implement it without support. Yet this proposition was not reflected in the state of the pastures in the catchment, with in most cases productivity well below potential. Producers had rightly identified skills and confidence were barriers to pasture improvement. Very few could afford to 'experiment' and have their investment fail, so they erred on the side of being conservative.

The desire to invest in private good became a fundamental philosophical difference between the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group and the Government agencies, especially the Department of Conservation and Environment. This strained the partnership between the catchment group and the Department. However the support of the VFF and the opportunity to receive financial backing from a private sponsor allowed the catchment group to pursue their beliefs. Productive catchment management became the catchphrase of the Woody Yaloak Group.

In 1999 there is wider recognition that investment in pursuits that provide short-term financial gain or are less strategic are, at times, necessary to catalyse and sustain momentum. Unfortunately the rhetoric does not always transpire into concrete support as we have discovered when using this proposition in seeking grants from Government agencies.

The planning phase took eight months. Although not as elaborate as many catchment plans developed in other areas it met a number of needs. The plan

- Recognised and quantified the main issues in the catchment from a landholder perspective
- Described the philosophy underpinning the project
- Identified key elements in the process for achieving participation
- Listed on ground targets
- Identified cost sharing arrangements.

The Action Plan was presented to the VFF and Alcoa of Australia Limited. A four year \$450,000 sponsorship deal was secured and implementation commenced in March 1993.

Results from implementation of the action plan were significant. Landholder participation in landcare activities increased from less than 20 per cent in 1992 to 68 per cent in 1996. It has since reached a plateau at around 70 per cent involvement.

The program also saw a sustained increase in the amount of pasture sowing, tree planting and vermin control each year. More than 4,000 ha of pasture was sown, 135 ha of trees established, 200,000 rabbits killed and 40 ha of erosion stabilised. Importantly the proportion of on ground work requiring assistance from the catchment project declined over the first five years although tree planting and pasture sowing were sustained. We believe this vindicates our initial approach, namely that designing a program to encourage participation and reduce the risk associated with 'having a go' would build confidence and lead to a long term change in thinking about landcare.

Total expenditure in the first five years was more than \$2.5 million. Landholders and Alcoa of Australia Limited contributed more than 90 per cent or \$2.3 million of the total project costs, with landholders contributing nearly \$2.0 million of that \$2.3 million.

Our catchment group can be justifiably proud of their achievements. Despite the generous assistance of Alcoa to purchase materials for on ground works, the National Landcare Program and other supporters, it has been the input and commitment of individual landholders that has achieved this result. Yet it is sobering to realise these efforts have re-established trees on less than 0.2 per cent of the landscape and deep rooted perennial pastures on less than five per cent of the grazing land.

1997 - 1999

It became obvious to the Woody Yaloak catchment committee that we could not sustain a project of this magnitude unless we had the full backing of the Government agencies involved in catchment management. We needed incentives for on ground works and the facilitation and co-ordination to support individual landholders plan and implement projects. The National Landcare Program (NLP), which funded our co-ordinator 15 hours per week in the first three years of the project, had ended and we were unsuccessful in obtaining facilitation support from other areas to continue this role. The levy, agreed to by landholders in 1993 to help support co-ordination and technical advice, was insufficient to provide continued one on one service for landholders.

Cash to offset part of the cost of on ground works was more easily accessible. We have continued in partnership with Alcoa, with an annual contribution for the purchase of materials of \$30,000 per year. The group was also successful in securing a range of grants for more than \$250,000 through various programs in the Department and Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) and the recently convened Catchment Management Authority (CMA).

However the minimal level of facilitation and the ineligibility of some previous programs, such as pasture improvement, changed the original character of the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project. Although we kept trying to secure facilitation and co-ordination support and provide opportunities to be involved in productivity based programs, our main success with funding was in areas of stream rehabilitation and tree establishment. At the same time commodity prices continued to decline. This placed growing pressure on landholders to find the cash contribution to match the financial incentive offered and in many cases the cash was to undertake works that did not provide an immediate return to the individual. Understandably landholders deferred or cancelled projects based on simple financial imperatives. The desire to participate was there; unfortunately the incentives we had on offer did not ideally match the immediate needs of the landholders.

The lack of profitability created a vicious cycle for the catchment group. Declining profitability forced many landholders, and especially the young people, to take up part time work off farm. In turn this has reduced their ability to attend activities and participate on a voluntary basis. While the pool of landcare volunteers to take up committee and organising positions diminished, the challenges with providing a service to continue the momentum built during the first five years increased. In 1992 we had designed and were implementing a plan that met community needs. It balanced conservation and productivity, importantly people chose to participate and while they were part of the program their attitudes changed, they developed skills, confidence and ultimately they did things differently. Six years later we felt like we had lost the initiative and were just going through the motions. Our activities were being shaped by what funding was available. This resulted in offering assistance through programs that often did not meet our members expectations or needs. Interest and enthusiasm began to decline.

At this time we were fortunate to work with Ted Rowley through an initiative of Alcoa of Australia Limited, a key person in the development of the West Australian Landcare program. Ted brought some valuable insights from his experiences in the West. We combined these with the principles that brought us success in the original action plan. Make participation as easy as possible and offer an integrated productivity and conservation program.

We started by adopting a 'neighbourhood group'¹ approach. Neighbourhood groups involve between three and 12 landholders with common interests and concerns. In most cases properties adjoin. Previously all works had been done on an individual basis, and although subsequent farm walks provided opportunities for other farmers to see what had occurred, the successes and failures, there was minimal external input into the planning and development of the implemented solutions.

The neighbourhood group approach has started to change this. Groups are provided with facilitation support (via Alcoa funding) to plan five-year programs. Each group is asked 'what they want this group area to look like in five years time?' This group vision is then broken down into a logical sequence of events that need to be carried out each year. This work has recently been aided by the development of a CD ROM.

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¹ I believe we have started to create a culture within the Woody Yaloak community where landcare and environmental activities are part of and not

an exception to running a profitable farm business. This is a very desirable outcome. Yet if we accept this proposition, we must also be willing to accept the need to improve profitability of businesses in the catchment. We want people to invest in landcare, even when times are tough, so I believe we need to reciprocate by investing in lifting profitability when incomes are low. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The most important asset we have in the catchment is the people. Without them, and despite all the good intentions of Government and other organisations, changes in the landscape and the waterways won't happen. It's the people we must nurture and our programs must accommodate their changing moods and needs. Since 1993 the farming circumstances in Woody Yaloak have changed. The landscape is starting to change. Trees are appearing, perennial pastures are becoming more widespread, rabbits and weeds have been reduced and some waterways have been protected. However business profits have diminished and the pool of Volunteer labour has contracted as people work longer hours or off farm. Survival is a real issue.

The future is clear to us. Woody Yaloak was built on the philosophy of 'having a go'. It also required us to stick to our beliefs, even when support from outside was less than encouraging. We are now asking our new partners to do the same, to walk with us as we make a 'generational' change in how landcare is conducted. We believe our catchment group is in the best position to read the mood of our community and provide the vehicle to facilitate the delivery of the integrated services. But it will rely on the support we receive from our partners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following organisations assisted in the development and implementation of the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project:

- Alcoa of Australia Limited
- Corangamite Catchment Management Authority
- Victorian Farmers Federation
- Greening Australia Victoria
- Golden Plains Shire
- Departments of Conservation and Natural Resources
- State Data Centre
- Ballarat University College
- The LEAP program
- Corangamite Salinity Implementation Group
- The Sustainable Grazing Systems program
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FOOTNOTE

21 Woody Yaloak River Catchment Annual Report, 1994