



An accidental outcome: Social capital and its implications for Landcare and the “status quo”

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A B S T R A C T

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For 25 years the Australian Landcare program has encouraged rural land managers to work cooperatively to resolve natural resource management issues across the nation. Landcare has spread and the model is used internationally. Despite its successes, Landcare has come under criticism for not sufficiently directing land management practices towards environmental sustainability. This criticism sees it as having maintained the “status quo”.

Alternatively Landcare has been credited with acting as an agent that creates social capital, bringing neighbours together to share ideas and implement cooperative projects. We use the concept of social capital to offer insight into how Landcare groups as social networks can either inhibit or promote changes in land management.

Using findings from a study of 16 Landcare groups in South Eastern Victoria, Australia, we demonstrate that various forms of social capital can act to either inhibit or empower individuals and groups to challenge the status quo of land management practice. We explain how the intentions of these grass roots organisations are to emphasise local knowledge, ownership and power. However, in some cases these actions produce the accidental outcome of maintaining the status quo. We argue that the way Landcare groups are supported can further aggravates this.

At a time when the health of Landcare is in question, and the need for solutions to natural resource management problems are critical, understanding the implications of these findings will enable institutions to tailor programs to facilitate groups to challenge the status quo and reinvigorate interest in Landcare as a community building model.

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1. Introduction

Landcare as a program developed by government in partnership with rural landholders began in Australia in 1986 (Kirner, 2000a,b). This followed many years of informal cooperative action by community groups (Campbell, 1992; Cary and Webb, 2000; Edgar, 1999; Eliason, 1995). Landcare has grown to over 5000 groups in Australia (Youl et al., 2006). The Landcare model has spread to Europe, the United States, South Africa and the Philippines. Landcare’s international adoption reflects its engagement of individual farmers in collective action to improve natural resource outcomes (Youl et al., 2006).

A “typical” Australian Landcare group is generally made up of people who reside or manage land within the locale in which the group operates. Groups meet, discuss and engage in a diverse range of land management projects either on private or public lands.

A debate has occurred about what Landcare really constitutes and its meaning (Campbell, 1992, 1997; Cary and Webb, 2000; Lockie, 1996b, 1997, 2001). Cary and Webb (2000: 2) accept that there are multiple meanings of Landcare and “differentiate between three elements of *landcare*; namely: the National Landcare Program, community landcare and the landcare movement”. Lockie (2001: 244) sees the meaning of Landcare as a variation between whether it is spelt with a capital L or not. He defines ‘Landcare’ as “a government program designed to encourage people to form community Landcare groups with the purpose of addressing local environmental problems in a cooperative and coordinated manner” and ‘landcare’ as “used to describe all manner of activities that have something or other to do with the development of more sustainable natural resource management”. Notwithstanding this debate

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Despite its many successes, Landcare has been criticised in Australia (Curtis et al., 2000). These criticisms range from questions of ownership of Landcare, to its effectiveness at delivering natural resource outcomes. Of particular interest is the criticism that Landcare has not revolutionised land management, it is asserted that it has simply maintained the status quo or achieved small incremental change (Barr and Cary, 2000; Beilin, 2000, 2001; Curtis and De Lacy, 1998; Gill, 2004; Lawrence, 2000; Ledger, 1995; Lockie, 1996a,b, 2004; Morrissey and Lawrence, 1997). These authors have speculated about why Landcare has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary in facilitating the adoption of sustainable land management practices.

This is a critical time in Landcare’s history. Research indicates that “Landcare groups are disbanding, going into recess or merging with others at a faster rate than groups are forming” (Curtis and Cooke, 2006: ii) and the amount of on ground works completed by Landcare groups has decreased over time (Curtis and Sample, 2010) and that this could reflect a decline in the health of Landcare. These findings are congruent with research conducted in West Gippsland, Tasmania and Central Victoria (Compton et al., 2009). Farming based Landcare groups are particularly in decline. These trends are influenced in part by the changes in natural resource management funding since the introduction of the Australian Government’s regional delivery arrangements in 2002² (Compton et al., 2009) and the introduction of Caring for Our Country, the current national natural resource management funding program. It has reduced funds available to Landcare groups which puts them at risk of decline (Simpson and Clifton, 2010) and has “failed to provide a strategy or measures for re-connecting, integrating and re-invigorating the activities of local groups...” (Robins and Kanowski, 2011: 100). According to Campbell (2009) it is time to re-engage and re-invest in Landcare.

Landcare has been credited with acting as an agent for the creation of social capital in rural communities (Cramb, 2005; Sobels et al., 2001; Webb and Cary, 2004, 2005). Our findings advance this idea by demonstrating that the social capital associated with Landcare can act to both inhibit and empower individuals and groups to challenge the status quo. We use collective empowerment theory (Reininger et al., 2006) and the concept of social capital (Putnam, 1995) to explain why Landcare groups and their supporting organisations often maintain a ‘social status quo’. We argue that in order to better develop support for Landcare groups, understanding the implications of this will enable institutions to tailor programs to facilitate groups to challenge the status quo rather than maintain it.

This study is of 16 Landcare groups (the Maffra and Districts Landcare Network), located in Gippsland, South Eastern Victoria, Australia. The Network was formed in 1998 and is a voluntary body whose function is to pool resources, manage support staff and collectively represent individual Landcare groups. Some of the

groups were amongst the first established in Australia (1984), other groups in the Network were formed more recently (2005). The local area has been experiencing changing land use with increasing in-migration and lifestyle farmers. As a result the Network is quite diverse and constitutes an ideal setting to study the conflicts, pressures and interests that are challenging Landcare today. By examining the characteristics of the 16 groups in relation to empowerment and social capital we suggest one possible explanation for how grass roots organisations can produce an accidental outcome of maintaining the status quo.

2. Landcare and the status quo

Gill (2004: 137) asserts that Landcare is “seen to be tinkering with, if not strengthening, existing land use practices rather than facilitating more searching discussions about current and future land use in rural Australia”. Lockie (1996a: 33) argues that Landcare has simply “supported the continuing intensification of agriculture and given it environmental and social credibility” and has promoted “particular approaches...rather than to encourage debate over these approaches and alternatives” (Lockie, 2004: 52–53). Landcare has also been seen to promote the productivist practices recommended by State agricultural departments (Lockie, 1996b). These practices are seen as “evolutionary rather than revolutionary” (Barr and Cary, 2000: 25). Whilst tree planting, excluding livestock from waterways and soil erosion mitigation activities are some of the unquestioned practices of Landcare, these activities are seen as being on the edges of people’s farms and paddocks (Beilin, 2000) whilst within the paddocks the traditional and perhaps unsustainable practices continue. Landcare yet remains to “challenge the current production mandate...with a more deliberate approach to changing the landscape” (Beilin, 2001: 151). Other authors criticise Landcare as having a negative environmental impact. When discussing vegetation clearing that occurred in pastoral areas of Queensland, Haworth (1997: 168) argues “the Landcare ethic is totally ineffective in stopping the factors driving massive ecosystem destruction”. Woodhill (2010: 67) states that Landcare has “failed to engage with the structural causes of land degradation and has not facilitated any significant learning about them”.

The central focus to this paper is a concept we have coined the ‘social status quo’. It parallels the concept of ‘group think’ which has been proposed as stifling the debate within Landcare groups about sustainable land management practices (Carr, 1995) and “reinforces existing viewpoints” (Barr and Cary, 2000: 25). Group think is exemplified by Morrissey and Lawrence (1997) review of Landcare in central Queensland. They found some groups were dominated by farmers who limited discussion of issues, ensuring that Landcare did not threaten the interests of primary industry. This is supported by Curtis and De Lacy (1998: 75) statement that “farmer organisations and government have embraced Landcare as a strategy to deflect criticisms of structural impediments to sustainable natural resource management”. The ‘social status quo’ goes beyond a political explanation for this behaviour and proposes that processes associated with the formation and maintenance of social capital while in some circumstances promotes community development can in others provide the strong bonds that constitute a social mechanism for maintaining the status quo.

Landcare may have maintained the “status quo” (Ledger, 1995: 131) and may not have facilitated revolution in land management, however it could be argued that it may not have been designed to do so. Beilin (2000: 30) argues that Landcarers are not “participating in a more radical re-thinking of their landscapes, but in perpetuating the system they currently work within because the funding reinforces that paradigm”. In addition recent findings

² Regional delivery of funding refers to a system of natural resource management grant delivery in Australia whereby regional bodies (called catchment management authorities in Victoria) are entrusted by the Australian Federal Government to implement endorsed regional strategies aimed at addressing natural resource management issues. See Ewing (2000) and Farrelly (2005). These strategies are invested in by both Federal and State governments via grant programs, such as the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT). Prior to the regional delivery model, Landcare groups accessed State and Federal grants directly and had control and administrative responsibility for their grants. Since regional delivery Landcare groups have to be part of the regional funding program which results in Landcare groups having minimal involvement in funding processes with natural resource management grants being managed at the regional level. The implications of this are discussed in more detail in Compton et al. (2009).

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