

Changing the delivery of environmental stewardship in Australia

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Introduction

Roles played by the private sector, the philanthropic sector and conservation organisations in Australia have evolved over time. This paper reviews the emergent trends that have taken their place alongside the roles played by more established conservation organisations that provided environmental activism and political energy to conservation during the past two decades. These new developments have been made possible because an increasingly urbanised population in Australia was receptive to newly articulated values for conservation management.

The interplay between conservation organisations, voters, government regulation, a landscape undergoing rapid development, rising demand for natural resources, environmental change and a growing awareness of the business of sustainability as an element of investment success has been expressed in recent years in cultural change, the focus of this commentary.

Changes in the financial support of conservation and environmental issues

Philanthropic organisations and the civil society in general have been cautious in their investments in conservation and environmental issues. There are obvious reasons for some of the hesitation. One is a tradition of private philanthropic support for social issues (such as medicine, education and welfare) and the arts, activities that are often specified by mission statements and charters of the long-established trusts and foundations. The environment is a

relatively new concern. Some institutions have the flexibility to encompass the environment within their charters; others had to undertake a specific effort to do so.

Given the compositions of many of the boards of these organisations, it is not surprising that the political activism that characterised many elements of the environmental movement in the 1980s did not ‘mesh’ with the interests and comfort of board members who were generally leaders in business, politics and professional life in the major cities. Further, some of the rhetoric and ‘marketing’ positions taken by politically active conservation groups about some topics were not judged to be a fair treatment of all sides of an issue or sufficiently factual to fit with the internal cultures of these philanthropic organisations.

In excusing themselves from political campaigns in conservation and environmental activism, these organisations became recipients of grant requests for small projects, including wildlife surveys, and field-based species and focused research. Such projects lack the strategic grit that characterised many of the competing bids for support that came from social, medical, basic research, education and international programs. These small projects rarely engaged the imagination of trustees or provided creative scope for program development. They also tended to be ‘one-off’ investments in which the dividends from the investment vanished with the end of the granting period. Consequently, many foundations invested their resources relatively sparingly in environmental issues. There were certainly exceptions, such as The Ian Potter Foundation, which signed up other philanthropic organisations and the government to implement The Potter Farmland Plan that saw its values and mission emerge through components of the subsequent Landcare movement. The Myer Foundation, Thomas Foundation, R E Ross Trust, John T Reid Charitable Trust, Hugh Williamson Foundation and others made significant contributions in the interface of rural capacity building, sustainable primary production, conservation, restoration, species recovery, basic research and land management. Generally these organisations provided grants that enabled other organisations to carry out tasks approved by the philanthropic organisation’s chartered purpose but, through the nature of their charters, did not undertake work directly themselves.

As major conservation organisations such as the Australian Conservation Foundation, Greenpeace, WWF–Australia and the Wilderness Society took to the stage of national political life, they increased their memberships, expanded their political influence and developed an urban constituency. Their relationships with government were in part probing and adversarial, and in part collaborative and dependent. Out of this complexity, conservation organisations pushed policy direction and drove decision making in government as major lobbying forces to be cultivated while remaining significant parts of a successful political constituency. Government funded some operating costs of these organisations’ administrative roles. Support from the constituencies of these organisations propelled the expansion of Australian government interests into what was the business of states and territories.

Recent years have seen some Australian corporate philanthropy move overseas as traditional iconic Australian businesses have become foreign-owned. Corporate head offices, generally located away from Australia, make most decisions about philanthropic investment. Exceptions are, particularly, mining companies working in regional Australia that invest in the communities in which they operate, supporting the activities of local non-government organisations and engaging in their own conservation activities. However, corporate giving within Australia includes two-thirds of all businesses that provide financial and in-kind donations. Much of the new giving is from successful individuals and small businesses committed to making a difference in their communities.

Within Australia and overseas, philanthropy is experiencing growth driven by two factors. One is wealth. Over 200 000 Australians have liquid assets of over a million dollars and several thousand Australians have a net worth of more than \$20 million, as reported in the summer 2004–05 issue of *Australian Philanthropy* (Cham 2005). The other factor is change in taxation policy to encourage the establishment of foundations and provide incentives for giving. These factors helped about 400 newly emerging philanthropic bodies that are perpetual and thus constitute a major structural change within the private sector.

Examples include the Poola Foundation, a new Australian organisation that established the Climate Institute with a grant of \$10 million to inform Australians about climate change. The Christensen Fund (www.christensenfund.org), an American foundation with a base in Cairns, links people, culture and elements of landscape to achieve sustainability. Philanthropy Australia's counterpart, the international Environmental Grantmakers Association (www.ega.org), is a forum for foundations investing in the environment through their recognition that environmental issues are global in their scope and significance. The Myer Foundation's funds a range of activities in water and land management, biodiversity, and the roles that social, cultural and economic factors play in these. Watermark Australia, instigated by the Victorian Women's Trust, works to increase 'water literacy' in Australia. Philanthropic interests are also drawn to the support of a conservation economy that provides financial, social and environmental opportunities for traditional peoples.

Volunteer hours rose by 16 per cent since 2000 for the year to 2005, reaching 836 million hours per year. Volunteering Australia reports that the environment is a major recipient. The 'Giving Australia' report (www.partnerships.gov.au) (FaCS 2005), commissioned by the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership, documents giving in many forms that total \$7.7 billion from individuals and \$3.3 billion from businesses in one year (2004). Leadership within the philanthropic community in Australia has been provided by Philanthropy Australia, its staff and member organisations.

Motivation is difficult to assess for some environmental and social activities in large businesses that are featured in annual reports and shareholder meetings as investments in sustainability. How much of the investment is the expression of cultural change in the business world and how much is driven by new components of tax laws?

Today, the reality for most large businesses is that investment in environmental and social progressiveness goes unrewarded economically in the cut and thrust of the marketplace that reflects global competitiveness. The increase in environmental awareness is not often matched by similar changes in activity on the ground. Similarly, large commercial operations in general give in smaller and more targeted amounts, seemingly in accordance with the public's and shareholders' perceptions. Throughout the corporate world, most share purchases are made by those who seek profitability through their investments, rather than good corporate citizenship.

In the longer run, it may not matter whether change is slowed by the economic realities of the marketplace, and accelerated by tax laws and the linkage between successful small businesses and individuals with their communities. As political will regarding the pursuit of sustainability increases, tax laws and government policy will be significant market forces in their own right. As well, the cultural changes that are rapidly emerging through the presence and activities of privately prescribed funds, burgeoning voluntarism and new understanding

of the interdependence of nature, rural landscapes and urban populations give reason to hope for a more sustainable pursuit of environmental sustainability tomorrow.

Inside many corporate organisations, especially some prominent banking entities in Australia, are programs that facilitate staff donations and voluntarism. These programs may reflect that care of the environment may be seen by both the community and shareholders as a private responsibility more than it is a corporate responsibility. Nonetheless, there are many examples of generous and effective corporate support of environmental programs. Government policy can do much to reinforce corporate aspirations in this area.

Australia in the past has not attracted significant international corporate and philanthropic investment because of the perception abroad that Australia, a developed nation, does not need assistance. It is alleged that if Australia lacks adequate conservation investment, it is because of a lack of will to allocate the needed resources. Another assessment of Australia's conservation needs for international conservation investment rests on its globally significant endemic biodiversity that is distributed over a large area of land with relatively infertile soils and a frequently erratic, stressful climate. Australian conservation draws on resources from a small tax base that must also support the infrastructure for the continent. A relationship of high biodiversity – large area – small tax base justifies international assistance in maintaining globally significant biodiversity.

Furthermore, Australian conservation is a good investment. It is carried out in a landscape and within a nation that is free of corruption, stably and sympathetically governed, replete with capable partner organisations able to leverage any international investment and provide an efficient means of demonstrating models or developing new programs in a low-risk setting. The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Nature Conservancy are looking at Australian conservation. Their interest will perhaps inspire others as well.

The first generation of influential Australian conservation organisations

Large Australian conservation organisations came to prominence in the 1980s by their active support of environmental and conservation policy to be adopted by government. They learned to use the media and other communications to bring issues before the public, and they learned to be effective in their use of the process. Membership size is important in these organisations as a correlate of the depth of support for their positions. Membership, along with individualised 'culture', operating style and, to some extent, specialisation in the issues addressed, distinguish these organisations from one another. Dialogue between the organisation's leadership and its membership is a significant tool for influencing policy and meeting the operating costs of the organisation. The membership, in turn, shapes the conservation organisation's activities. It can address the issues that are endorsed by its membership and thereby retain its membership. Major shifts are difficult at best. It is less expensive to retain an existing member than to recruit a replacement member. Thus the interests and priorities of the organisation are shaped by its membership and, if the organisation has gauged these correctly, the organisation remains relevant to its membership and funded. These realities reduce the scope of negotiations that can be pursued. Apart from the size of the membership, there are other important performance measures such as visibility, leadership, influence, exposure and milestones set by making a difference.

The memberships drawn to these organisations are largely from urban centres where people are particularly interested in protected areas, wildlife, natural resources, aesthetic treasures of nature including 'wilderness', ecosystem services including clean air and water, biodiversity and iconic parts of Australia. Major gains have been made in creating tools to restrain incompatible developments, building the conservation estate and recognising the plight of species in trouble.

Urban dwellers are detached physically from the natural landscape lying outside protected areas, yet they have expectations about how these areas would be used to produce food, how the visual landscape should appear and how natural resources should be husbanded. They came to these values without understanding that another element of the Australian population, the diminishing rural sector, was an essential partner in delivering the conditions necessary to sustain their vision. The formal conservation estate will always be too small to meet the goals for conservation sought by the urban population.

Australia is not special in having this urban–rural dichotomy. It is much in evidence throughout the world as we, as a species, become increasingly urbanised (Crane and Kinzig 2005). Thus urban people seek environmental and other services provided by rural people but without a corresponding mechanism to provide or transfer resources from the population centres to pay for services that must be rendered by those on rural lands (Beeton et al. in prep). Creating a framework that benefits both urban and rural Australia is a high priority so that demands for nature by urban populations and the stewardship of nature by rural populations can be achieved.

Rural Australia's dilemma

The situation of rural Australia is difficult at best. Rural people compete in a globalised economy without many of the tools that would help them to do so. Many rural regions are experiencing declining quality, resilience and abundance of natural resources used for primary production. Rights of land tenure are changing, with water having become a tradable commodity dissociated from land in some parts of the country. The rural population is ageing and lacks many of the benefits that are available to the urban population. The recent Telstra statistics regarding services for rural Australia are an indication of the overall trend. Economic, social, knowledge, natural and other forms of 'capital' have been transferred over time from the countryside to urban centres (Beeton et al. in prep) and there is little indication that a reverse flow has seriously begun.

Land prices are high relative to the capacity for productivity from the land to service interest-bearing debt. This and other factors have fuelled cycles of hopeful land purchase, increased intensity of land use to drive more production, financial loss, recovery of financial loss through sale of the farm at an increased price for land, only to send the cycle around again. Although productivity has not fallen in many parts of Australia, the number of farming families has decreased over time and there has been little growth in the real gross value of agricultural production even though there have been substantial increases in the volume of agricultural production.

Meanwhile, in some parts of the rural sector, agribusiness has taken over farming on a large scale with high-input, high-capitalisation, and high-energy production systems. These businesses have more in common culturally with the urban sector than with the rural sector,

and as successfully transform the social dimensions of a rural community as does pervasive rural poverty and bankruptcies.

Government responses

Governments have made innovative forays into addressing some of these issues with Sustainable Regions programs and other approaches, including an example from Victoria in which the state government invites farmers to bid on conservation payments to the farmers to provide stewardship for the biodiversity and natural resources that are part of their land holdings. In New South Wales, under the WEST program, four property owners in western New South Wales have been paid to destock their properties and manage them for environmental outcomes. Other examples are organisations that assist rural land owners to covenant land for conservation and be assisted in maintaining conservation values that are in place (see Cutbush 2006). Australia has yet to codify the learning from these conservation and environmental investment experiments, but the experience is regarded as very positive by both government and farmers.

We have all been here before in terms of values and thinking. In Australia, the drivers in agricultural land use have been production and, later, productivity, and only lately has the concept of sustainability been included. The Progressive Party in the United States of America sought to combine a mosaic of on-farm production and on-farm 'nature' through retention of wildlife habitat, native plant communities and smaller wildlife species set against a background of social, economic and educational development in farming communities. This movement was a major force until World War II, when goals for maximising production for the war effort overshadowed the reality of the complexity of functional rural communities. The United States has never regained the lost ground of small-scale farming using low inputs and pursuing concepts of holistic self-sufficiency through diversified farm incomes and production systems that integrate with nature. The shaping influences of agrichemical companies and high-energy farming have driven agricultural education for the last half-century.

These same elements of commingled conservation, environmental considerations, diversified production, off-farm income to allow relaxed pressures for production, and rural integration have arisen in recent years in Australia from a variety of influences including innovative production systems, creative visioning within communities (such as those at Chinchilla and Dalby in Queensland that have integrated their urban and rural production systems into a melded work force for the benefits of both town and farming members of the community), diversified farm production and economic farm planning that embraces off-farm income and an essential part of the income stream that affords rural lifestyles.

Second-generation environmental organisations

The second-generation organisations arose from the energy created in the ascendancy of Landcare, new Australian government programs that help public or private conservation goals, and land acquisition for conservation through covenanting and purchase for the national conservation estate. In some ways, this next generation of organisations extended the reach of the earlier organisations from policy to application of policy on the ground. These

later organisations focused on accomplishing tasks on the ground and on delivering tangible examples of policy. The later organisations may or may not have members and memberships, but certainly have donors and active management of their activities through the influences of their trustees. These organisations strive to meet donor expectations and accountability in attainment of performance milestones.

Their cultures are similar to those in the business community with whom they engage. This business community was generally unable to come aboard the membership-driven, policy-oriented conservation organisations of the first generation, often because of the sense of conflict between business and the rhetoric of the campaigns to influence policy that were often uncomfortable for business.

Examples of this second generation of organisations are the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, Australian Wildlife Conservancy and Australian Landscape Trust. All purchase land that may be kept or passed on to other conservation entities. All endeavour to maintain the biodiversity and natural assets of the land. All engage surrounding rural communities to a greater or lesser extent to achieve conservation outcomes.

Funding for the activities of these and many other environmental organisations comes from a range of sources including government, corporate investment, philanthropy and individuals. No specific data are available, but a substantial proportion of operating income for these organisations comes from low-income earners who pledge money regularly. High net wealth donors are drawn to support visible outcomes such as acquisitions of land. Once acquired, the mundane responsibilities of funding operations take over. The struggle to attract investment for these activities is much more of a challenge than land-purchasing campaigns.

Specialised environmental and taxon-dedicated organisations

There are also specialist organisations with or without memberships that achieve conservation work and/or research in the field. These entities recruit their members to help with carrying out established work under a well-defined mission. Earthwatch expanded research opportunities for both scientists and members of the community. Recent Earthwatch activities have encompassed conservation objectives as well. Trust for Nature, a Victorian statutory body with a hybrid culture of government and private sector components, spread its activities through land acquisition, land management, covenanting, resale of land with conservation values but with restrictions on titles, and other activities directed towards the pursuit of conservation goals.

Birds Australia, the Australian Koala Foundation and many other taxon-dedicated organisations, many of them local in their interests, have dedicated constituencies and contribute to conservation, research, education and policy related to wildlife. Birds Australia, as well as its long tradition of research and monitoring, has produced documentation for priorities in avian conservation, among other valuable contributions. In recent years, Birds Australia has experimented successfully with land acquisition, land management and conservation programs that rely on volunteered services.

Delivery of environmental services

Conservation organisations, first formed to address small-scale local problems, now deliver a variety of services. As government reduces its direct delivery of services and devolves functions to contractors, the management and accountability that is core to these partnerships focus on quantitative measurement (Beeton et al. in prep, Johns and Roskam 2004, Nasbitt and Aburdene 1990). Thus government has a tool for defining boundaries and the nature of services that follow from government policy. There are benefits to government (leveraging resources, delegating delivery of government policy) and to private sector organisations (extending the mission through the aid of additional financial resources and benefits of government-conferred legitimacy). Organisations participating in contracts for government programs include Conservation Volunteers Australia (administered Green Corps in which young people learned workplace skills and performed work of benefit to the environment) and Greening Australia (planted trees, delivered the services of Green Corps). WWF–Australia has delivered services of the Endangered Species Network. Sustainable Regions grants represent another approach to public–private investment partnerships.

Contracts with government underwrite some conservation activities and can drive the directions of conservation organisations. Government grants generally require significant matching components. Conservation organisations must find the matching resources from funding not restricted to specific projects. Without having general operating support, grants as contracts with matching requirements are not affordable. Through the matching components, government directs additional private sector resources to goals of the public sector.

Programs such as Landcare mix public and private cultures, and are delivered through both government and community volunteers. These programs commingle conservation and rural community capacity building directed by the community itself to achieve investments in nature with the highest values for individual communities.

These activities give ownership of environmental stewardship to local communities and build capacity in the rural sector so that environmental stewardship is better understood and valued. An objective for durable conservation is to ensure that the rural sector has the resources (knowledge, human, social and financial capitals) to invest in environmental stewardship.

Experiments in ‘privatisation’ of government roles in caring for the conservation estate

Command and control styles in conservation have not worked to secure nature and natural resources (Holling and Meefe 1996). National parks cannot address many conservation and environmental responsibilities that are evident in the rural sector. Various experiments have arisen in recent years in which the private sector has entered into agreements with government for the management of conservation land, or has purchased land to become a private conservation estate as a means of offering an alternative to the management culture of government agencies working on public land. In these alternative models, voluntarism plays a key role as a form of enabling investment.

A particularly exciting development is the proposal from the Barcoo Shire Council in Queensland to assume responsibility for delivering management services for land within the Queensland conservation estate located within shire boundaries. The Queensland Government has been asked to devolve responsibility for public land to local government. There are other examples of similar collaborations, including that of the Australian Landscape Trust with the Renmark Paringa Council in South Australia for operating the McCormick Centre for the Environment (a facility dedicated to environmental education for the lower Murray–Darling Basin) that is owned by the council.

The trend for the private sector to invest in the management of conservation land addresses some of the issues that burden relationships between government agencies with land management responsibilities and their surrounding rural communities. As budgets for conservation lands declined over the past 30 years, government agencies had fewer resources to pay for feral animal control, restoration, revegetation, wildlife management and other services. Surrounding communities criticised the efforts of agencies that struggled to provide services to an expanding public conservation estate. In addition to constraints of funding, agencies operated through a ‘top down’ culture that was necessary to ensure accountability for resources and statutory responsibilities. Under these circumstances, many agencies cannot engage constructively with neighbouring communities.

Some agencies embrace limited community involvement confined to donations of money and supervised volunteer tasks such as tree planting. These activities do not devolve significant responsibility or management discretion to the volunteers who regard these tasks as labour substitution for government personnel. Some volunteers are satisfied with these experiences but others are not, especially those most energetic in their criticism of underfinanced government agencies. An impasse is reached when an agency cannot meet demands for improved management services and the community is barred from tackling problems directly because of statutory regulation of a park.

In order to capture the resources of voluntarism, a recipient organisation recognises that individuals assess the value of their volunteer activities to themselves, their community and their environment. They continue to volunteer when that assessment reflects wise use of their time and personal resources. The role in rural communities that voluntarism and its accompanying social networks play in cultural change in environmental practices and natural resource management cannot be underestimated.

Contrasting models of volunteer participation have been explored in the literature. Finding the right balance in volunteer programs for individuals, communities and nature is important in making a successful transition in devolving responsibilities from government to communities as society copes with diminishing contributions of the tax base to management of the public conservation estate.

There is an increasingly recognised necessity for the transfer of submarginal lands from production uses to environmental and conservation uses. Management of these resources can only be accomplished by increasing the engagement of rural communities living around these lands and by innovative engagement of the urban population, as well, as resource providers.

In this environment, several task-focused environmental organisations have developed, bringing private sector investment into support of a parallel, private conservation estate receptive to activities that are not easily accommodated in the traditional national park model.

Two of these organisations are the Australian Bush Heritage Fund (ABHF) and the Australian Landscape Trust (ALT). There are, as well, a number of other active organisations with similar characteristics, including the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

Both the ABHF and the ALT rely on contributions of significant donors and on grants. Both provide opportunities for a variety of investments in conservation land and programs. These are learning organisations, evolving programs and testing ideas within a private sector culture that recognises the ‘deal making’ approach of business culture, the give and take that is essential between donors, volunteers of services and the management of the organisations. Both organisations attempt to involve local communities in their operations, and seek to extend their influence beyond reserve boundaries. Because of the significant private investment that is required for the operations of these organisations, performance milestones and accountability are high priorities.

Case study: the Australian Bush Heritage Fund

The ABHF is a national, independent non-profit organisation that acquires and manages land and water of outstanding conservation significance. It selects areas to protect that have plant and animals communities that are under threat and poorly represented in public reserves. It is Australia’s most widely supported organisation of this type, having attracted the support of more than 12 000 Australians. ABHF is funded mainly by tax-deductible donations and secondarily through long-term ethical investments. ABHF protects and manages nineteen reserves throughout Australia containing 346 000 hectares of land. Over 133 vegetation communities are represented; 52 of these are of high conservation significance. These reserves protect at least 53 plant species and 51 animal species of conservation significance.

ABHF is an ‘investment’ business managing philanthropic investments in nature conservation. Corporate and private investors seek assurances on the cost/benefit or demonstrable outcomes from their investments, and such investments are often tied to specific outcomes. While this ‘business’ approach suits larger corporate investors smaller donors sometimes seek personal involvement. To this end, ABHF’s skilled volunteers have contributed over \$300 000 worth of labour to conservation efforts.

The following examples represent the breadth of ABHF projects.

Carnarvon Station Reserve

Carnarvon Station Reserve is in the highlands of central Queensland, in a region that has undergone significant land clearing, particularly over the last twenty years. Before its acquisition as a reserve, Carnarvon Station was a pastoral property but had not been extensively developed.

In 2001 ABHF acquired the 59 000 hectare property to protect its 28 regional ecosystems, seven of which were classified as ‘Endangered’ and one as ‘Of Concern’. Most of the endangered ecosystems were not represented in the adjacent national park. Grazing by cattle and feral horses was degrading the property. Feral pigs were miring its springs. In the five years following purchase, the health of the property has improved significantly. Native grasslands have returned, as have birds of prey that feed on returning wildlife.

By the end of 2005, eight springs will have been fenced to exclude feral pigs and horses, with an immediate improvement in water quality and the return of aquatic plants and animals. Over 300 pigs and 400 horses have been removed. Weed control has targeted areas of Johnson and buffel grass, while reducing further infestations through strict weed hygiene. A fire plan for the property guides controlled burns that maximise habitat complexity and reduce the impacts of wildfire. These control programs are ongoing and volunteer rangers help the reserve managers to carry out the work.

Reedy Creek Reserve

The 452-hectare Reedy Creek Reserve in coastal Queensland has been created through an innovative partnership between a property developer and a non-profit environmental organisation. The ‘Sunrise at 1770’ development is a model for ecologically sensitive, coastal, residential development. It has stringent controls on water and energy use, waste management, land clearing and landscape management. The development sits between Deepwater National Park to the south, a coastal reserve to the north-east, a rural residential development to the west and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The housing development occupies 148 hectares of the 600-hectare site. The remaining 452 hectares has been gifted to the ABHF.

The reserve has a diverse landscape of *Corymbia* woodlands, rare vine-forest communities and riparian melaleuca forests that are floristically significant. The creek forms a complex bird, freshwater fish and amphibian habitat. The coastal zone is an important turtle-breeding area and, although not part of the reserve, is also being managed by the ABHF.

As part of the Reedy Creek Reserve management program, ABHF is controlling weeds, erosion and feral animals and implementing a rigorous burning program to protect life and property, maintain habitat complexity and reduce the risk of destructive wildfires. The cost of this management work and of having reserve managers permanently on-site is paid for by an environmental levy contributed by the lot owners of the ‘Sunrise at 1770’ development.

Case study: the Australian Landscape Trust

The ALT operates through public–private partnerships and with local communities in environments in need of remediation and community voluntarism. These are areas in which the public sector lacks sufficient resources to address long-term environmental debt. ALT works in two locations, the Riverland in South Australia and at Strathfieldsaye Estate in East Gippsland, Victoria.

Through joint land purchases with the Australian Government, ALT and the Riverland community are able to take day-to-day responsibility for approximately 340 000 hectares of Murray River floodplain and mallee land in South Australia. This is accomplished through a management contract with the Australian Government, holder of the titles to Calperum and Taylorville stations. Community volunteers deliver the day-to-day care of the individual paddocks within these properties and responsibilities defined by the government management contract. This arrangement with the Australian Government is in its eighth year of operation, providing an example of partnerships and enhanced investment in the conservation estate, and in repair of degraded environments through private sector resources. Over 10 000 volunteer hours are given each year in land management and projects.

Aggressive feral animal control over more than a decade has permitted rapid recovery of ground vegetation and of small vertebrate populations. Additional volunteer services are also given to research, monitoring, restoration and revegetation and, especially, protection for a high density of mallee fowl. Volunteers also provide conservation services elsewhere in the community on private land, and they have contributed to heritage restoration and protection.

Calperum and Taylorville stations, along with neighbouring parts of the South Australian conservation estate, Scotia (belonging to Australian Wildlife Conservancy), Gluepot (belonging to Birds Australia), and near several Victorian protected areas including Neds Corner (belonging to Trust for Nature), encompass nearly 2 million hectares of relatively intact mallee lands containing a rich biodiversity including Critical Habitat for Black Eared Miners and the newly discovered Jurassic ancestor of beetles. All of the private sector properties rely on large donations of community support, much of it through volunteered labour and professional services.

Calperum Station includes a portion of a Ramsar-listed wetland that was once part of the overland stock route between New South Wales and the Adelaide market. The legacy of intensive grazing, desertification and salinisation due to hydrological change is an ongoing challenge for management.

Strathfieldsaye Estate, a property held in trust, occupies the north shore of Lake Wellington. This 1 700-hectare farm and heritage homestead belonged to the Disher family. Through bequest, the property is dedicated to the pursuit of sustainability, research, teaching and engagement of the community in the best uses of natural resources. Support from the Australian Government's Sustainable Regions program allowed a number of programs that reflect community interests to develop. One of these is designing a linked farming operation with a detailed program of monitoring the impacts of farming on natural resources used in production.

Through Dr Bob Beeton, University of Queensland, two community development courses were offered to community members who then used their learning and networks in a variety of investments in environment and cultural endeavours. These activities are merging with other conservation and educational activities and community networks that add to local capacity in an area of Australia challenged by environmental degradation and excessive clearing (less than 3 per cent of native vegetation remains on private land).

Learning from the experience of large international conservation organisations

Although resources of Australian conservation organisations are small compared with the budgets of major international conservation organisations, there are some salutary lessons to note. Chapin (2004) described the risks from these major international organisations (including The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International) focusing too exclusively on raising funds and from ignoring the limitations of skills for delivering field-based programs. There are disadvantages from concentrating on simplified performance goals such as numbers of species conserved and hectares of land protected. These measures made achievements of private sector organisations marketable to businesses that could easily understand performance in such terms. By concentrating on agenda-based conservation science rather than on the social and economic realities that provide the context for conservation, these large organisations put their long-term effectiveness at risk.

Conclusion

Many throughout the conservation literature observe that nothing of a lasting nature is gained in conservation without the engagement of local communities. The interrelatedness of environmental and biodiversity goals and local community capacity building is becoming acknowledged. This relationship is essential in ensuring that gains achieved can last for both nature and the surrounding custodial communities. Nothing is secured without both of these elements.

In this newly recognised dimension of engagement of communities in conservation, the second-generation task-focused Australian environmental organisations, such as ABHF, Birds Australia, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Trust for Nature, ALT and others, are going well, perhaps aided by their dependence on donations of funds, time, skills, labour and a culture of empowered voluntarism as substitutions for large budgets that could provide funding for the purchase of these services.

Great optimism can be sustained from the rapid transformation of Australian and international philanthropy. In Australia, government taxation policy linked to the increase of wealth, especially of individuals and small businesses, resulted in a burgeoning of giving that has created a new cultural force for the support of environmental objectives. Voluntarism is a major component of this new investment, much of which is directed to communities in which this new wealth has been gained and communities in which volunteers live.

A great tragedy of the commons is in play in the marine environment, generally devoid of empowered small businesses, generous and aware individuals, and the direct oversight of the nation. On the sea floor, in the estuaries and coastal zones, in marine biodiversity and in the sustainability of harvests, profits are generally privatised and losses are socialised. There is no resident community to act on behalf of the vastness of these global losses. Perhaps the next great environmental challenge will be the economic, social, political and intellectual pursuit of natural and biological resource equity of the seas.

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