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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE RANGELANDS – WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

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ABSTRACT

Capacity Building through the 'care' programs has had mixed success in the rangelands of NSW. Implementation of these programs in the rangelands has faced many challenges including distance, scale, isolation and the lack of both human and financial resources. A survey carried out to evaluate the programs and to gain an understanding of the future needs for these types of projects is detailed here.

Results from this survey have shown that: there is wide recognition for the "Landcare" brand name; the objectives of the programs are generally well supported; and that a better delivery mechanism for these programs may be required.

INTRODUCTION

Program evaluation is an important, but challenging, undertaking. Cook and Shadish (1986) explained that program evaluators seek 'knowledge about the value of social programs and their constituent parts, knowledge that can be used in the short term to make the programs more responsive to the social problems they are meant to ameliorate'. It is in this light that a survey was deemed necessary. There have been a series of state and national surveys on the role of Landcare and other care programs but there has never been a full evaluation of the 'care' programs within the Western Catchment area. The Western Catchment represents approximately one quarter of NSW.

A comprehensive telephone survey was conducted to evaluate the 'care' programs in the Western Catchment area and to assist the development of a better model for capacity building in the rangelands of NSW. The 'care' programs include Landcare, Rivercare, Bushcare and Outback Waterwatch (also known as Streamwatch).

METHOD

The survey was carried out in January 2002 over a one-month duration. It surveyed two hundred people within the Western Catchment. Of those interviewed one hundred people have been involved with a care program and were labelled 'care participants'. The remaining one hundred people interviewed had no involvement with any of the 'care' programs and were labelled 'non-participants'. This was to enable an understanding of what 'participants' thought of the 'care' programs and to determine why 'non-participants' had not been involved with a 'care' program in the past and what would influence them to become involved with capacity building programs.

The results of the survey will form the basis of a plan for environmental community support in the Western Catchment. The plan will suggest the type of support required in the future to assist community groups and individuals in community capacity building and to ensure optimum environmental outcomes are achieved.

The telephone survey, undertaken by an independent consultant, interviewed two hundred people randomly selected from the Western Catchment. The client base was predominantly comprised of members of the grazing community with an average holding of 30, 000 hectares.

A series of questions were asked to gauge an understanding of:

- How the various 'care' programs objectives are perceived,
- What people liked about them,
- What people did not like about them,
- What ways could these programs be improved,

- What they would like to see change,
- Whether they were directly involved with any of the programs through a project, and
- What environmental issues concern them?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The rural population was well represented in the survey results, however, few urban people were interviewed and no indigenous people were surveyed. This deficiency has resulted in a bias towards the views of rural people.

The results of the survey revealed the following findings:

- The “Landcare” brand name is well known by the community. Other ‘care’ programs do not have the same level of recognition.
- The objectives of the ‘care’ programs are well recognised and supported, but the way the programs were delivered needs to change. In order to face the challenges of distance, small population base and type of on-ground work that can take place, Landcare and other ‘care’ programs must change to better accommodate the needs of the community. This is an ongoing problem throughout the rangelands. In South West Queensland, people need to consider the cost of travelling to meetings. Meetings have to be worthwhile with a clear understanding of what the outcomes are to be. This affects the role of community participation in the rangelands (Boyd, 2000).
- Ongoing programs must be adapted to account for the major issues the community perceives need to be addressed. This will help ensure community participation and capacity building in the rangelands can strengthen.
- ‘Care participants’ have changed their management practices more in the past few years than ‘non-participants’ have. Management practices have included reduced stocking rates, increased feral animal control and strategic fencing of watering points.

The structure of capacity building within the Western Catchment will continue to change according to these findings. To reduce the confusion between the different ‘care’ programs it has been proposed, as a favoured option, to absorb all the ‘care’ programs under “Landcare” to take advantage of its high brand recognition. Sutton (1999) in another study reported that programs designed to progress environmental management in rangelands should promote, facilitate and support social networks throughout those areas to maximise community involvement and promote education and awareness.

CONCLUSION

Capacity building in the rangelands will continue to be challenging. The results of the survey have demonstrated that a change must be made in order to strengthen community participation in the rangelands. A change can take many forms, however, utilizing the name brand of “Landcare” will provide a future framework for capacity building.

In the future, capacity building in the rangelands will invite increasing participation from a wider section of the community including groups, individuals, schools and other organisations. This can be achieved offering a more flexible program.

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