

THE LANDCARE MOVEMENT: community based design and action on a scale to match the continent

This essay was written in early 1995 for a planned book by award winning architect Greg Burgess called Building Community which was dealing with the general subject of design for and by the community and included contributions from many design professionals and community facilitators. I had worked previously with Greg and he wanted me to write on this subject despite my suggestions of others who may be better qualified. For various reasons the book was never published but it provided me with an opportunity to further consolidate some of the issues referred to in the book review of Greening A Brown Land and clarify the link between Landcare and Permaculture. In the absence of publication I used the essay as a basis for my own lectures and other presentations of my ideas about Landcare including at the Australian Permaculture Convergence in Adelaide in early 1995 and the Landcare For Educators courses run by the Creswick Landcare Centre.

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To attempt to overview the Landcare movement of rural Australia is a great challenge due to its diversity and geographic breadth. To explain its connection to the design professions and the field of community design in a brief essay maybe impossible. In attempting this, my perspective is inevitably a more idiosyncratic one than that provided by more mainstream perspectives.¹

Landcare is concerned with the repair and restoration of the productive land resource base of Australia. Its origins were from diverse local groups which emerged simultaneously in the early 1980's in several regions affected by land degradation, most notably salinity and tree decline. In 1986 the Victorian government used the name Landcare for its program to assist these voluntary groups and two years later the federal government initiated the National Landcare Program as the community-based vehicle for funding of rural land restoration and sustainable landuse. By 1994, Landcare has been estimated to involve one third of the Australian farming community in more than 2,000 groups.²

The scale and long term nature of land degradation problems has been a force for bringing rural communities together. Local schools, churches and service organisations, businesses and councils have all been active in Landcare. The effect of land degradation on rural communities must be seen in the context of the crippling effects of long term decline in commodity prices which have severely eroded the economic and social base of rural Australia. Government service cutbacks and progressive elimination of remaining agricultural subsidies have added to the pain. The global economic forces involved seem unaffected by the plight or action of local communities. In comparison, land degradation has seemed

¹ Campbell, A. Landcare: communities shaping their land, their future Allen and Unwin 1994

² Smith, D. Landcare: Who owns the revolution? in Ecosno.82 1994

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amenable to community action. By the process, social interaction and community cohesion have been strengthened, also providing a better base for dealing with the economic crisis. At the government policy level, Landcare is now one of the few politically acceptable vehicles for returning some of the national wealth to rural communities.

The solutions to salinity, erosion, acidification, tree decline and other symptoms of ecosystem breakdown demanded fundamental changes to agriculture. The integration of design and planning skills into farm management is one of those fundamental changes. For example, it is impossible to contemplate large scale tree plantings without considering fencing, stock water supply, access, etc. and thus the existing if unconscious "design" of the farm. On a larger scale, changing how the farm interacts with its watershed or catchment landscape demands an understanding of the catchment system.

Within the Landcare movement, the **whole farm planning** concept and **integrated catchment management** have been the main expressions of this change, empowering farmers and rural communities to develop and apply design skills relevant to agriculture. Whole farm planning although simple and perhaps obvious to design professionals, was a radical change in thinking for farm managers. It has generally been a kitchen table design process where the farm family is the design team with some input from technical advisors. The emergence of women and the next generation as important contributors has been a characteristic of Landcare which has challenged the generally patriarchal decision making processes within farming families and rural communities.

Although design professionals have contributed to whole farm planning, they have been more conspicuous by their absence, partially a reflection of the small number of landscape architects with expertise relevant to agriculture. Today, some landscape architects are working in this field drawing together the new technology of revegetation, design thinking and farming systems. However the cutting edge of land design remains with creative farmer innovators. The design professionals, like the agricultural researchers, have been the followers.

My own development of the Permaculture concept with Bill Mollison in the mid 1970's³ involved the application of design principles inherent in nature to the creation and management of productive landuse systems (particularly agriculture). More broadly, we saw that design was the critical skill in the fragile and uncertain transition to a sustainable post industrial society.

These design principles were derived from study of both the science of 'systems ecology' and pre-industrial examples of sustainable landuse. They suggested agricultural systems needed fundamental redesign rather than fine tuning. A much greater role for trees and other perennial plants to stabilise the landscape and provide for human needs was one of the cornerstones of the permaculture concept.

At the same time hydrologists working on the causes of dry land salinity in central Victoria were developing the theory (now widely accepted) that replacement of the perennial native vegetation system of trees, shrubs and perennial grasses with annual crops and grasses had generated a saline water table which had the potential to destroy much of the agricultural productivity of the region within the next 60 years.

³ Mollison, B. and Holmgren, D. Permaculture One Corgi 1978

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Development of a healthy framework of perennial vegetation is now widely accepted as the most universal strategy for sustainable farming and has become the primary focus for many Landcare activities and programs.

Permaculture has itself grown into a world wide movement⁴ for the practical development of environmental solutions, initially as a result of the tireless work of Bill Mollison. However, it continues to be widely perceived as a radical and alternative response to the environmental crisis on the fringes of both the environmental and organic farming movements.

Landcare, on the other hand, is now widely perceived as a mainstream, even conservative response to environmental crisis. From the permaculture perspective some of the activities and approaches which come under the Landcare umbrella hardly represent sustainable landuse. For example, the large resources devoted to destroying self-established non-indigenous trees and shrubs especially in urban and urban fringe Landcare groups is more an expression of a refocused war against nature rather than a transformation to a working with nature.

However, the image of Landcare as mainstream and Permaculture as alternative or radical disguises how radical ideas via empowered individuals and small groups have created what is now accepted as the mainstream. Today, many of the key figures involved in Landcare, from local groups through to top decision makers, have been influenced by permaculture and see their work in Landcare as a expression of that influence. The story of the development of Landcare in central Victoria provides important examples.

In 1978, Terry White convened the Salt Action Liaison Team, a small group of local farmers around Maryborough. Terry was very active in the local community on many fronts and was a pivotal figure in the fledgling permaculture movement as founding editor of the (then) Permaculture Journal.

In 1983, S.A.L.T. published a revegetation strategy⁵ which outlined the issues and the solutions. This led to state and federal funding of a community-controlled revegetation project. Project Branchout provided work for unemployed people planting trees and shrubs in demonstration sites across the Loddon, Campaspe and Avoca river catchments. These plantings were specifically designed to address salinity and other land degradation issues as well as explore options for new tree based land uses. Through the hands-on and often informal decisions of Rod May, Wayne Irving and others⁶, the permaculture agenda was being implemented with support from government departments, local councils, farmer and community organisations and schools. In retrospect, this work can be seen as having catalysed the explosion of farm and community Landcare action in the region. There are now dozens of local Landcare and related groups leading direct action on farms to repair and restore the land.

Project Branchout went on to initiate and sponsor a range of research, education and extension projects including my own research for more specific and refined design guidelines for revegetation of one of the most treeless land types within the catchments, the

⁴ Holmgren, D. Uncommon Sense in Permaculture International Journal no. 44 1992

⁵ Oates, N. A Revegetation Strategy for the Loddon-Campaspe Region Dept of Conservation Forests and Lands 1983

⁶ May, Rod personal communication

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volcanic plains.⁷ This work directly addressed revegetation designed to stabilise existing broad acre land uses, central to the Landcare agenda. But it also shows how revegetation could provide the essential foundation for a long term transition to more integrated and intensive sustainable land uses envisaged in permaculture.

At the national policy level, Landcare is the practical expression of the accord between the Federal government, National Farmers Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation. This relatively quiet consensus has received very little media attention compared with the deadening stalemate over management of public native forests. The Landcare accord has allowed radical ecological ideas to be given a forum at the highest levels.

For example, Jason Alexandra, another permaculture pioneer now representing Australian Conservation Foundation in the Landcare accord, has been a strong advocate of farm forestry as a sustainable land use.⁸ The current rush of creative energy in the farm forestry side of Landcare is overturning many of the assumptions of the forestry profession and industry about where and how forests can be grown in ways which are both ecologically sustainable and economically viable. In the process, a new culture of forestry is being born within farming communities and may even lay the foundations for the eventual reform and redirection of public forestry in Australia.

Landcare has been an effective vehicle for the spread, adoption and ownership of better land management techniques. It has also fostered a conservation ethic which in many ways reverses the development ethic which helped found Australia's rural communities and industries. Given the conservative reputation of farming and rural communities, this extensive and practical expression of environmental awareness is a major achievement of a process which no one owns or controls.

However, the examples given show that beyond adoption of well proven methods, more radical ideas and creative innovation from the fringe of society can rapidly influence the mainstream through community based voluntary action. Some of the pioneer innovators⁹ have suggested Landcare has become dominated by bureaucracy and has lost its radical vision. However, at least part of this loss of vision is the inevitable consequence of the now very broad community support and popularisation of Landcare. Any true community process can only reflect the consensus of values and understandings of that community. For the pioneers, some disillusionment with the process of adoption of their innovations is inevitable as they and others struggle to articulate and bring to life the models for the next step towards sustainable land use.

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⁷ Holmgren, D. Trees On the Treeless Plains Revegetation Manual For the Volcanic Landscapes of Central Victoria Holmgren Design Services 1994

⁸ Alexandra, J. Realising the potential of a farm-based forestry sector in Catchments of Green conference proceedings Greening Australia 1992

⁹ Smith, D. *op. cit.*