

## **The 2000 Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to explore community based environmental management to find new and innovative ways to encourage social change through the landcare movement in Australia.**

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### **Introduction**

How do you get a family of four living in a concrete jungle to care about conservation? How do you encourage a child to take on environmental habits if they have never had grass beneath their feet? What makes people support environmental causes if it doesn't immediately gratify some sudden need? How do you deliver a piece of communication to a non-English speaking Chinese family when you don't produce your resources in any language other than English? How do you get three warring governments to agree to protect the world's only mountain gorillas where their borders meet? How is a violin manufacturer made to see that clearing critically endangered hardwood does not leave any for business 30 years from now?

Can communication do it? What techniques are the most effective? How can environmental messages break through the troubles of modern life? How can you have your communication material penetrate the jumble of technology and traditional communication methods? Is there a way for communication to change behaviour.

### **Executive Summary**

Raising awareness and knowledge of an issue through communication is something that can be achieved, given sufficient resources and a well researched and executed campaign. The landcare movement in Australia has been extremely successful in this regard, with the word 'landcare' even being given its own entry in the Macquarie dictionary. Various traditional communication tools have been used over many years to achieve and maintain high levels of awareness, such as the media, special events, advertising, multimedia and the internet.

But how can that awareness and knowledge of an issue be elevated to real and useful community action? What does it take to get people to change their environmental behaviour through individual or group action? Once again, the landcare movement has had some success in this area, but with less than 40% of farmers actively involved, and limited activity in urban areas, this is a major challenge for the landcare movement into the future. There is no doubt that most Australians now have some understanding of their environmental impact in the places where they live, work and spend their recreation time. But how many are taking action to rectify this? How many have made the environmental ethos part of their everyday life? What motivates people to make changes? Are there

some actions people are more likely to take than others? And how much of this can be achieved by communication?

This Churchill Fellowship was designed to look at new and innovative ways of engaging communities in order to create environmental action at local, state and national level. For that reason, a wide variety of groups in the USA and the UK were visited, some very small and community focused, others with an international focus, some publicly funded and some government funded.

These groups were chosen for their diversity of strategies, some for their innovation and some for their successes. All were chosen because they have managed in some way to engage the people and the communities they seek to, and have motivated people to take action on behalf of the natural environment.

Many hours of interviews and transcripts were prepared as part of this Churchill Fellowship. For the purpose of this report, only the most salient points have been extracted from each group visit, to allow for brevity and effectiveness.

## **Major Lessons Learned from each Visit**

### **The Sierra Club - USA**

The Sierra Club is a highly visible environmental group in the United States, with over 600,000 members and an enormous communication budget. The Sierra Club is the biggest green lobby group in the USA and possibly the world.

Offices throughout most states of the USA generate local membership, and the head office in San Francisco co-ordinates the work of the Club.

The key focus of the Sierra Club is campaigns driven by political lobbying on particular issues where change is needed. This may be achieved through litigation, threat of litigation or changes to State or Federal laws.

In order to achieve this, the generation and maintenance of paying members of the Sierra Club is extremely important and a key focus of the organization. The philosophy is that you can't really make a difference as an individual, but if you join a club of like-minded individuals, change is possible.

The key lesson learned from the Sierra Club was that in order to get people to take action you have to know, in extreme detail, who they are and what motivates them to action. The Sierra Club has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on market research of its own members. It knows where its members like to travel, which wines they drink and what their personal interests are. The database is extremely sophisticated and designed to target particular people with particular issues. For example, people living on the coast, people who like to go hiking, people who are anti-landfill.

This allows campaigns on a particular issue to be highly targeted to suit the needs and desires of individuals, and different members are recruited for different campaigns.

In Australia, the state landcare offices hold the databases of landcare groups, little if any research into the membership makeup of those groups exists. This exposes a significant weakness— landcare doesn't really know its own membership, so how then can it expect to motivate itself or others to take action?

A second important lesson is that the Sierra Club clearly identifies its key priority issues, in association with staff and focus groups of members. This 'membership statement' is developed into printed materials such as posters and brochures and distributed to all members and staff throughout the country as a constant reminder of the role of the Sierra Club, and as a reinforcement for the key messages of the organization.

The landcare movement would benefit from a statement such as this for two reasons. The communication role of Landcare Australia is often diluted by the fact there are literally thousands of issues being tackled by landcare groups at the local level, and therefore thousands of messages that go with those issues. A communication campaign that motivates people to action must be accompanied with clear and direct messages, and a 'landcare membership statement' would help with that. The second reason is that most of the issues landcare groups are working on are those which will take many tens of years to resolve, such as salinity or soil erosion. The Sierra Club takes action on issues that are here and now, that are already in the public spotlight, and are therefore already generating media attention. Perhaps Landcare Australia could learn from this, and at least make strong statements, on important environmental issues of the day. This may also motivate local groups to take action on issues of national significance, and people not already involved in landcare to take up the cause.

### **Fauna and Flora International**

Founded in 1903, Fauna and Flora International is the world's longest established international conservation organisation. It is actively working to conserve threatened species and ecosystems in more than 60 countries, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs.

For this last reason, FFI is quite similar to landcare in its philosophy, in that environmental solutions are a balance between pure environmental outcomes, and the needs of people and businesses that exist within the environment.

FFI achieves its goals through providing support to conservation initiatives throughout the world, in the form of partnerships, technical assistance and direct funding, again somewhat similar to the landcare movement but on a global scale. Its two key roles are raising funds for projects and coordinating them.

The best way to illustrate the work of FFI is to outline a couple of its recent projects:

- The International Gorilla Conservation Programme aims to protect the habitat of the remaining 650 mountain gorillas in Central Africa.
- The Antiguan Racer (the rarest snake in the world) Conservation Project, formed in 1995 to save the racer snake from extinction (it's estimated only 60 remain) on Great Bird Island, off the coast of Antigua. The project brings together six national and international organizations that all bring different skills and strengths.
- The "Soundwood" project is designed to help protect endangered tree species used in the production of musical instruments such as rosewood, ebony and mahogany.

In all of these projects, community engagement is the key to success in achieving change, not fancy communication techniques that cost a lot of money. Each group affected by the project takes part in its planning, development and implementation – including businesses, local people and local conservation groups.

While the communication tools of FFI are somewhat limited and fairly unsophisticated, particularly given its global nature, there were a couple of important lessons to be learned.

The first was that positive perceptions of the organisation (for example Sir David Attenborough says it "is the doyen of all conservation societies") is built on real results and demonstrable change in communities throughout the world, over a long period of time.

FFI has a reputation for delivering quality projects, with practical on-ground solutions that work for the natural environment and the people that live there. And this is achieved with limited resources invested in promotion. The CEO stated that the key strategy for promotion of the organisation was word of mouth. That seems incredible for an organisation of its size in this day and age of communication technology! The lesson is that landcare is built on a similar philosophy to FFI - it does deliver quality, it looks for long-term sustainable solutions and it does so in partnership with local communities. Over time, the reputation of landcare will continue to grow through word of mouth, and perhaps this is the best form of communication there is, despite all the advances in communication technology. Landcare cannot afford to lose sight of its real objectives – reversing soil and water degradation in landscapes across the country, and getting this job done is as good a communication tool as any.

The second lesson is that FFI chooses the projects it supports, based on a number of factors. One of the key ones is that the project must have unique qualities that tug at the heart strings and that will make people want to support them. This has two outcomes. It helps generate funds and it plays a major role in securing media support.

## **National Parks Conservation Association**

The National Parks Conservation Association was established in 1919 and is America's only private, nonprofit advocacy organisation dedicated to protecting, preserving and enhancing the US National Parks system.

The group is focused on litigation, influencing government and acting as a watchdog. There is little on-ground work achieved, but more of a focus on raising funds and then using them to have issues heard, either in court or through the media. The media is a powerful tool used by this group to draw attention to threats to the National Parks system in the United States. These threats include the use of motorboats, trailbikes and snowmobiles in the parks, the setting aside of nationally significant lands and development such as roads or landfill sites.

Much of the work of the Association is in influencing Congress representatives with local issues, in the hope that these issues will be taken to the President and dealt with through legislation at the Federal level.

According to the NPCA "without federal legislation, even though it's outdated, conservation in the United States wouldn't work. Conservation is heavily underpinned by legislation in the Endangered Species Act, but this hasn't been re-authorised in over 10 years."

Obviously, this group is highly different to landcare and at first sight, it appears there may be nothing to really learn from the National Parks Conservation Association that could be applied to landcare. However, there were a few lessons learned about the value of National Parks, and how the existence of them can help people to appreciate nature and therefore nurture an environmental spirit. Experiences and communicating those experiences is essential in getting people to change their behaviour.

According to the NPCA, people visiting a special place as a child, with a person they respect or look up to, is a key factor influencing their behaviour later in life. People who have a positive experience of the natural environment as a child are much more likely to be conservationists later in life.

The lesson is that landcare projects that give lots of people, particularly children, a positive experience with the environment, will help nurture a generation of people who care about conserving that environment. These projects need not focus on doing work for an environmental outcome – they need to allow children, in the company of a trusted adult, to appreciate nature for what it is. Most landcare projects have an element of that, but perhaps further attention needs to be given to this aspect of landcare projects, and communicated accordingly.

## **Green Corridor Partnership**

The Green Corridor Partnership was formed to identify and carry out a comprehensive program of environmental improvements to benefit those who use, live or work in the M4/A4 transport corridor from Heathrow Airport into London.

The Partnership funds a series of smaller environmental projects within the zone, with the aim of creating a greener and healthier gateway to London. The area in question is extremely densely populated, with residential homes, heavy and light industry and one of the busiest airports in the world. It is a road artery into London where people are affected by airborne pollution, noise and visual pollution, loss of biodiversity and landfill. There is also a mix of cultures and ethnic groups.

Many of the community projects are aimed at getting people outdoors and encouraging them to use public spaces that have become disused due to a raft of social problems. All of the usual problems of urban sprawl also place increased difficulty on the process of getting people involved.

An excellent example is the schools programs run in association with the Green Corridor Partnership. The partnership manages 20 projects a year, many focused on regeneration of playgrounds, interpretive trails, tree identification and tree planting. One of the common problems is that many of the children involved have never set foot in a natural environment. Observing their behaviour, it is obvious that most children felt uncomfortable in an outdoor space and did not know how to move within the natural environment. When you are dealing with fundamentals like this, it is an achievement to get children into an environment, let alone get them to be conservationists!

As a result of this, many of the projects are not necessarily designed with environmental fundamentals, but deliver environmental outcomes anyway. For example, most people living in the M4/A4 zone spend little time outdoors. As they become more dormant, they are less likely to enjoy the natural environment and are less likely to be healthy – so these projects can have a health outcome, as well as an environmental one. Cultural, physical and even health issues needed to be taken into account when designing the projects for the Green Corridor Partnership.

Each project is developed in consultation with people living in the area, and all are focused on getting people into the outdoors. For example, there has been a native garden planted in a cancer center to provide a place of quiet retreat. Another is the “Healthy Walks” project that was developed in association with local doctors who prescribe walking to their patients for heart problems – an outdoor walking trail was built and is promoted by the local GPs.

There are shared vegetable gardens planted amongst the allotments, planting days are organised with local youth centers, there’s an orienteering project and projects on council housing estates.

One of the key lessons learned from this group was the need to clearly identify the groups and demographics of the people living within the community project zones that you want involved. Census data was used to identify ethnicity, age and employment. This helped in recruiting volunteers, surveying and getting support from the locals and meant projects fit within existing social structures that had been ingrained for centuries.

Another lesson was that the consultation process was targeted to suit the needs of each group. The local communities themselves were used to gather information, generate interest (often through word-of-mouth), generate volunteers and open communication channels. Local champions were used to spread the good word about the project and this proved a very powerful tool.

The greatest success has been in getting people involved at the local level. Many residents had lived in the area all of their life, so their local knowledge was incredibly valuable. Ownership and identity for local people was the first step. This has had many flow on benefits including giving locals new skills, a new lease on life and for some, a purpose for life. The key was to find projects, places and actions that had meaning to people, and to recognize that those meanings may not necessarily fit the traditional definitions about what is right for environmental conservation.

The Green Corridor Partnership is an excellent example of getting people with little or no interest in the natural environment to make a real and positive contribution.

### **Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust – London Wetland Centre**

The London Wetland Centre is a rehabilitated wetland area found in the heart of London's suburban district. It is over 100 acres of wild ponds and pools, reedbeds, lakes and marsh that provides habitat for threatened wildfowl and many other native species. The London Wetland Centre acts as an educational facility and a sanctuary for Londoners, visitors and locals, many of whom have very little opportunity for interacting with the natural world.

The premise of the Centre is “connection” – connecting people with nature. This can prove very difficult when many of the visitors come from places and families where they have not been exposed to the natural world. Therefore, interactivity is essential and is a key strategy in the Centre's education programs.

These are curriculum based and offer students hands on experiences that they may never get anywhere else. There are guided walks, interpretive trails, exercises to demonstrate wetland animal movement, “talking duck” to show how wetland animals communicate and identifying and classifying activities.

On a broader scale, the Centre's environmental messages are linked to personal gratification or a personal experience. People need to be given a personal reason for

wanting to care about the environment, and that is difficult when you are competing with issues and causes like health or sport. Everybody knows someone who has died from cancer, or suffered from heart disease, or plays a sport and so it is therefore easier to gain support for those causes. But the environment is different, and needs to be linked to people's other social needs and priorities. This directly links to the ability to raise funds but more importantly, to the essential community ownership of the resource.

## **Recommendations**

- Develop a “landcare membership statement” that clearly identifies the issues landcare holds as its priorities, and distribute to all involved.
- Undergo extensive market research of landcare group members and individuals to determine their demographics, issues and aspirations.
- Use this information to develop a comprehensive database of landcare groups, with detailed information on the issues those groups are working on, and the makeup of members.
- Investigate the feasibility of individual membership of landcare – at the moment, if you're not in a group, you don't belong to landcare.
- Continue to focus on the core business of the landcare movement – delivering quality projects with real environmental outcomes – the word-of-mouth reputation of landcare is extremely valuable.
- Identify and support projects for publicity and funding that are appealing to a wider audience and that have high media values. These may be quite different to those projects that have the most value in terms of environmental outcomes, but will be essential in raising community support and funding.
- Create projects that give children a positive experience of the natural environment, so that they will develop a conservation philosophy later in life. Include their parents or a trusted adult if at all possible.
- Identify and use local champions to spread the word about landcare at the local level.
- Think about the alternative benefits of individual landcare projects – use lateral thinking to look for other outcomes such as health and social benefits.
- Landcare needs to connect people to nature in ways they may not have experienced before. The activities offered to people not already involved in landcare need to be broadened beyond tree planting (recognizing this is one of the more easily executed activities). Perhaps one, or many, landcare centers could be developed in urban areas and open to the public and school groups for interactive, hands on experience.
- Landcare needs to find ways of connecting its messages with causes that people already care about, and have a personal attachment to. We cannot assume that all people are connected to the natural environment, or feel support for the landcare cause. Strategic alliances with other causes, for example the Heart Foundation, may be able to link exercise, health and environment – that way catching more people in the landcare net.