



## Enhancing Tasmania's community generosity to care for the land

Landcare Tasmania is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Nationally, Landcare is more than 30 years old during which time this global movement has spread to 25 countries.

Landcare addresses a wide spectrum of land management issues and continues to evolve, with issues such as urban Landcare, coastal management, Council and Crown reserve management, waste and climate change now addressed by many groups.

In the past quarter of a century community Landcare in Tasmania has:

- Increased farm productivity and sustainability;
- Addressed soil degradation and land management including weeds and biosecurity issues;
- Protected and restored rivers and wetlands as well as degraded landscapes; and,
- Looked after native bush, wildlife and threatened species.

At the core of Landcare is a 'bottom up' approach because environment and sustainability issues are local community problems. The design and delivery of solutions are locally owned, designed and delivered, as is the maintenance of outcomes over time and passing on of knowledge and skills.

While heavily under-funded, Landcare groups in Tasmania have grown in numbers to 220, including 60 in the last 3 years. These groups have about 4,400 members and volunteers. These people each year perform 135,000 hours of community work. That's the equivalent in time alone of almost 65 full-time positions.

The challenges facing our land – in Australia and globally – are widespread and worrying. Natural, economic and social systems of production are under stress. Clearing of native vegetation, unsustainable agricultural practices, introduced pests and biosecurity all threaten production and environmental values when not properly managed. Tasmania's feral cat population carries one of the highest rates of toxoplasmosis infection in the world, with impacts on wildlife, farm stock and risks to human health.

Tasmanian landholders and the wider community have demonstrated willingness to contribute to addressing these issues through engagement with Landcare. But declining Commonwealth funding and Landcare groups' accessibility to remaining funding has severely curtailed the work these community volunteers can do.

The current National Landcare Program (NLP), funded to the tune of \$1.1B, has only a tiny proportion of funds delivered through *community* Landcare. It is a Landcare program in name only and has been widely criticised by the community Landcare movement across the country. It shows little improvement on the first tranche of the NLP, from which community Landcare groups were also largely excluded.

Right now, the Commonwealth has the opportunity to leverage the generosity of the Tasmanian community by supporting programs to deliver well-conceived actions that have genuine ownership and buy-in from those on the ground.

Despite declines in funding and misalignment of Government programs with community aspirations, Landcare Tasmania has managed to strengthen its position as a trusted facilitator of improvements in sustainable land management, has secured ongoing and increased support from the State government, and has facilitated extraordinary growth in our network of community Landcare group members.

Our ambition is to further expand the network of community groups, individuals, landholders, organisations and businesses to work together anywhere in Tasmania to address land management and conservation issues. Our aim is for all the land and coasts of Tasmania to be cared for by an extended Landcare community. There is a place for everyone in community Landcare.



A key to maximising the engagement of the Tasmanian community in Landcare initiatives is for them to be supported by paid facilitators and coordinators. Evidence emerging from the NSW government Local Landcare Initiative, which employs around 60 part-time facilitators across the State, is that this type of support role is delivering real benefits in terms of an engaged community, with increasing investment of volunteer time, improving community health, and strengthening the support of the broader community. Tasmania previously had Government and industry support for facilitators, the termination of which in the early 2000s resulted in a decline in Landcare groups, in particular in rural areas.

Paid facilitator and coordinator positions located within community Landcare organisations – not quangos - need to be a core commitment for any future government to be able to demonstrate it understands the needs and value of a bottom-up approach to environment and sustainable land management issues.

Regional Landcare Facilitators funded under the first NLP, and Regional Agricultural Landcare Facilitators funded under the current program, have not and will not realise the Landcare potential in Tasmania. This is because such positions are seen as extensions of government rather than of the community, constrained by the habitual misalignment of government priorities with those of local communities, and lack of trust in and performance of the organisations in which they are hosted.

Even where supported by facilitators, there are limits to the work that community volunteers can undertake, especially where there is a large initial investment or effort needed to create manageable future conditions. The Commonwealth can do much to revitalise community engagement in public and private land management quickly and cost-effectively by creating new national but locally driven programs that pick up on what works and shed those elements that very clearly haven't worked.

Opportunities to adopt and adapt programs include:

- The Green Army program was a good concept, but its design meant that much of the work undertaken will not be maintained. Delivering work through community Landcare organisations, providing for long-term projects and expanding age eligibility are critical to future programs of this type.
- The Indigenous Ranger Program from northern Australia provides benefits in terms of on-ground outcomes, employment and skills development. Adapting the program to allow for a model based on broader participant eligibility criteria and to complement volunteer efforts is a significant opportunity.
- The Biodiversity Fund provided larger sums of money over longer timeframes than did other programs. Better integration with other programs and community Landcare initiatives would help maximise on ground efforts and increase likelihood of maintenance of outcomes.
- The Caring for Our Country program had a strong focus on sustainable land management and was more accessible and relevant than what is now provided for under the NLP.
- The National Wildlife Corridors Program had potential to support biodiversity connectivity at the landscape scale and works specifically targeting important natural values across multiple landscapes and scales. Functioning landscapes have benefits to both nature conservation and farm production and should be prioritised in any new Commonwealth programs.
- Tasmania has a strong history of engagement by individual private landholders in conservation reserve and stewardship programs, for example the Private Land Conservation Program, Forest Conservation Fund, Land for Wildlife and Gardens for Wildlife. These voluntary programs built confidence among landholders that conservation and land management were compatible, complementary and synergistic forms of land management that could be incorporated into farm management. Re-starting these programs, with better integration across multiple properties, is needed to maximise benefits at the landscape scale.