



INCREASING LANDHOLDER COLLABORATION FOR LANDSCAPE SCALE CONSERVATION

Watershed Participatory Rural Appraisal Outcomes 14-16 September 2016

The landholder collaboration project team recently spent three days criss-crossing the territory of the Watershed Landcare group conducting a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) on landholder collaboration. PRA is a social research method that involves researchers assisting local people to identify issues that are important to them. It involves interviewing landholders and other local stakeholders, compiling their existing knowledge around the issues they identify as important and developing plans for further action on these issues.

For this PRA, the issues discussed with local stakeholders were aspects of production and conservation where landholders have been collaborating with one another or which could benefit from greater collaboration in the future. Over the course of three days between September 14 and 16, four pairs of interviewers spread out across the region to interview landholders on the types of collaboration they have been involved in. We aimed for each pair to have one outside researcher from the University of Sydney or University of New South Wales and one local stakeholder from Watershed Landcare or the Central Tablelands Local Land Services.

Interviews took place around Mudgee, Gulgong and Rylstone, with some taking place as far north as Leadville and as far south as the Capertee Valley. This roughly corresponds with the territory of Watershed Landcare, one of the key partners on the landholder collaboration project. On the third day, a workshop was held to bring together the PRA with the help of Watershed Landcare and Central Tablelands Local Land Services.



Landholder, researcher and Landcare representative discussing collaboration

Overall, 26 interviews were undertaken with a diverse range of landholder types. Half of the interviews were large landholders, including twelve who were large commercial farmers practising grazing and/or mixed cropping on at least a few thousand acres of land. Many of these farmers had been on the land for multiple generations. In addition, there was one interviewee involved in the management of National Parks and other protected areas.

The other half of the interviewees were small landholders, typically on 100 acres or less. Ten of these were not dependent on their land as their primary source of income, including four that were classed as conservation-oriented, four that were classed as lifestyle-oriented and two that were classed as semi-commercial. The other three small landholders ran commercial operations – two wineries and a seed/horticulture business.

During the interviews and workshop, it also became apparent that some important landholder groups had not been included, especially absentee landholders and mining companies. These groups will be followed up with at a later date.

Issues

Amongst the biggest issues for which landholder collaboration plays a role at present in the region are pest animal and weed management. Most interviewees saw the value of working closely with neighbours, especially absentee neighbours, on the management of wild dogs, pigs, kangaroos, foxes and cats, as well as for weeds like serrated tussock and St John's Wort. Riparian zones also require collaboration due to the way that they cut across property boundaries and carry soils, nutrients and pathogens downstream. Revegetation activities had been undertaken by several of the landholders we spoke to and this was identified as an area in which greater collaboration could enhance the benefits of such activities by linking them together to form biodiversity corridors across multiple properties.

In terms of commercial production, the PRA found that there is not a strong history of landholders grouping together to pool their resources or jointly buy or sell products through cooperatives or other mechanisms. However, there are some good examples of commercial producers working together to share knowledge and capitalise on regional branding opportunities, such as the Mudgee Wine Grape Growers Association. The joint promotion of tourism trails in places such as the Capertee Valley or along the disused rail line between Kandos and Mudgee emerged as some of the more promising opportunities for further commercial collaboration.



An important goal of the PRA was to assess the level of interest in developing an online tool that would allow landholders to identify opportunities for collaboration, access information and share their own knowledge about land management with other landholders. A lack of reliable internet access was highlighted as a major barrier for many landholders, but despite this there was strong interest in being able to upload monitoring data, photos and case studies using an online tool. Other priorities included data security, a simple user-friendly design and the ability to decide who information would be shared with (i.e. everyone or just a select group).

The next step for the project is to undertake a second PRA around the Hovells Creek area near Wyangala and Cowra in late October. After the results of the two PRAs are compared and priorities for further investigation are identified, we will return to these two regions to work closely with interested landholders throughout 2017 to progress some of their ideas for enhanced collaboration.

For further information about the project, or to contribute ideas about models or tools for collaboration, please contact the Project Manager, Alex Baumber at a.baumber@unsw.edu.au

You can also find further information on the project website and Facebook page

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