



knowledge for managing Australian landscapes

Volunteerism in NRM

VOLUNTEERISM, DEMOCRACY, ADMINISTRATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF FUTURE LANDSCAPES


Background

The current Natural Resources Management (NRM) framework across Australia is based on a model where regional bodies are supported heavily by volunteer activities and have been given increased responsibility in regard to NRM priorities and outcomes. Many issues have developed from this including:

- the desired roles of volunteers in regional NRM,
- the need to develop a common model of public administration, and
- the long term role and viability of volunteerism in NRM.

There are obvious challenges to such a model in the light of an aging population, external factors such as climate change, changes in population distribution and the issues of nesting such a model within traditional forms of governance.





How the issue was addressed

This project in collaboration with the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (VIC) and the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (WA) used a three stage methodology:

- Interviews of volunteers from a wide range of social service, health, youth and natural resource management organisations.
- Two catchment based workshops were conducted to examine the prognosis for effective volunteering in the long term using causal layered analysis in a futures workshop setting. These findings were used to create alternative "what if" scenarios.
- Scenarios were evaluated by a similar futures workshops in which a number of international participants from a variety of volunteerism, futures and NRM backgrounds joined with catchment representatives using the same futures methodologies.

The results of all three phases of the study were used to create a series of recommendations about what components were needed to be included in volunteerism policy to achieve a long term, effective and resilient volunteer based NRM system.

The three phases were also used to create a simple evaluation checklist to assist regional catchment management authorities ensure that their volunteer planning contributes to not only NRM but to the welfare and effectiveness of their volunteer contingent.

Recommendations

The first category of recommendations are suggested fundamentals that need to be in place if volunteer contributions to NRM are to be maximised. The second describes the key areas for greater knowledge if we are to foster volunteer participation in environmental management.

Evaluation checklist

This research has pointed to the need for consistent evaluation of the resilience, effectiveness and efficiency of volunteer contributions both in terms of adaptive learning and the prevention of surprise. There has been a growth in the literature on evaluation checklists in terms of ensuring that key questions are not missed in evaluations. These are simple effective tools to ensure that the key components of a system of policy and action are covered.

A simple checklist is provided and can be used in group settings to inform systematic debate or as a template for semi-structured interviews of individuals. It could be particularly useful in a multi-stakeholder sense to systematically identify the strengths and weaknesses in volunteer strategies and their implementation (in this case, facilitated groups with different interests could be particularly helpful in deriving new and improved approaches).

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Recommendations

The fundamentals

1. *Catchment based governance should be continued and integrated within existing government structures. Governance arrangements should ensure an holistic, systems approach to environmental management so that relative powers match required accountabilities and responsibilities.*
2. *The capability of current legislative frameworks to address cumulative environmental impacts should be investigated and reformed accordingly to support catchment based governance to meet environmental targets in accredited plans.*
3. *One of the greatest vulnerabilities to ongoing volunteerism in catchment management is the stop start nature of funding. To create certainty and sustainable volunteer based structures, NRM must become a legitimate part of Australia's GDP and be funded by the Federal Government in the same way as are health and education. In turn, catchment management bodies should not be dependent solely on one source of funding and look to securing long-term support from and partnerships with the corporate and industrial sectors.*
4. *There needs be a recognition at all levels of governance that investment in social capital is beneficial for the nation, but does not automatically occur, nor is it "free". Cooperative behaviour and volunteering, as an inherent part of human society, must be deliberately fostered and supported in long term policy at all levels of governance.*


5. *While there are differing views on whether statutory backing is required for effective NRM, it is essential for the future of volunteerism that issues such as representativeness and inclusiveness in catchment decision making be assured. The basic principles of procedural justice, including equal opportunity, empowerment and capacity to participate, must be integral to catchment management planning, implementation and evaluation.*
6. *Knowledge from "experts", scientists and consultants at State and Federal levels must be combined with local knowledge and expertise at the catchment level. Participation in scientific investigations and projects, as well as catchment planning and problem solving, should be integral to NRM.*

Future actions

The fundamentals identified above must first be in place.

7. *There is some concern and cynicism about regional bodies and volunteers being used by government to do work that simply represents cost shifting. There is also concern that the knowledge and time donated by volunteers is devalued. Both have the potential to seriously undermine the motivations for volunteering. A clear and agreed policy or statement on the rights and obligations of all levels of formal governance and volunteers should be cooperatively developed. This policy or statement should be underpinned by an upgrading of "civics" education, as the role and functioning of government is not always well understood.*
8. *There is a requirement for understanding of and systematic planning for the different roles and effective deployment of volunteers, including understanding expectations and skills. Volunteers should have a right and a choice to be involved in decision making as well as "doing".*



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9. *The role of paid work versus voluntary work in catchment management should be reviewed and policies developed to maximise the range of contributions over the long term. (For example, what is the role of incentives or reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses in encouraging volunteerism?)*
 10. Because of changing demographics, such as age, preferred living locality, gradual displacement by industrial change, and environmental conditions (such as climate change), *there should be ongoing evaluations of the extent, effectiveness and resilience of volunteer contributions to natural resource management to ensure timely response to change and flexibility of catchment plan implementation. This could be combined with the futures planning recommendation 12 below.*
 11. *Equality of opportunities for volunteering should be examined with a view to maximising the available contributions to NRM (for example the involvement of women and minority groups).*
 12. There is a general tendency for optimism in relation to the effectiveness of volunteers and a lack of willingness to look at the possibility of "surprise". This has the potential to lessen the resilience of volunteer based structures. *Futures workshops (as conducted in this study) should be conducted by catchment regional bodies on a five year cycle to minimise the chance of "surprise". While the causal layered analysis used here was successful in creating lateral thinking, other futures methods should be explored. Forecasting and backcasting should be a core business for volunteer reliant organisations.*

Checklist evaluation tool

This research has clearly pointed to the need for consistent evaluation of the resilience, effectiveness and efficiency of volunteer contributions both in terms of adaptive learning and the prevention of surprise. There has been a growth in the literature on evaluation checklists in terms of ensuring that key questions are not missed in evaluations. These are simple, but effective, tools to ensure that the key components of a system of policy and action are covered.

A simple checklist such as that provided below can guide evaluation. This checklist is designed so that all stakeholders in catchment management and NRM can systematically evaluate whether the planning and implementation of volunteer programs is holistic and coherent. Government (federal, state and local), regional groups, volunteer groups and individuals can evaluate the volunteer program from their particular points of view.

The issues addressed in the list, as with the *fundamental recommendations* are essential for functioning and sustainable volunteerism in NRM.

The checklist can be used in group settings to inform systematic debate, or as a template for semi-structured interviews of individuals. It could be particularly useful in a multi-stakeholder sense to systematically identify the strengths and weaknesses in volunteer strategies and their implementation. In this case, facilitated groups with different interests could be particularly helpful in deriving new and improved approaches.

To enhance implementation and facilitate discussion, a series of prompts (*in italics*) under each question are provided. These are, of course, not exhaustive.

The ARCWIS checklist for sustainable volunteerism in NRM


1. Is the main regional NRM decision making body representative of the key stakeholders in the community?
 - Are all key interests represented?
 - Is there regular communication between the decision making body and the volunteer workforce?
 - Are volunteers represented on the main decision making body?
 - Are the roles, responsibilities and rights of all groups agreed?
2. Is there evidence that local knowledge has been employed in NRM plans and activities?
 - Have "locals" been engaged in contributing knowledge to catchment or implementation plans? How do you know?
 - Have "locals" been consulted by scientists or consultants?
 - Are there sufficient mechanisms to provide for this?
3. Who is volunteering?
 - Are the characteristics of participating volunteers known?
 - Have opportunities been provided to encourage all groups in the community to volunteer?
 - Are there particular skills that need to be attracted?
4. What roles do the volunteers play in catchment NRM?
 - Does this include planning, decision making and "doing"?
 - Are volunteers involved in the key as well as peripheral activities?
 - Are there any other areas where volunteers could be effectively deployed?
 - Are the expectations and needs of volunteers being met?
5. Do these roles represent the best value for volunteers in the catchment?
 - Would it be more efficient or effective for contractors or others to perform the tasks?
 - Can volunteers see regular outcomes for which they feel proud and receive the credit?
 - Is there sufficient volunteer activity in key strategic areas?
6. Is there visible evidence of influence of volunteers on decision making and plan implementation?
 - Is there a record of what has been suggested by volunteers and what has been adopted by the decision making bodies?
 - Is feedback routinely provided to volunteers in response to their suggestions?
7. Is the funding that is needed for continued volunteerism available?
 - Have the expected costs for volunteer activities been budgeted for?
 - How has the budget been arrived at? Have volunteers been consulted?
 - Have alternatives to government funding been identified?
 - Have potential corporate and industry partnerships been fostered?
8. Do the volunteers enjoy the support of reasonable human and financial resources?
 - How much in terms of money and time does it cost individuals and group volunteers to participate?
 - Is any of this too much?
 - Is there sufficient financial recompense for volunteers?
 - Do volunteers have the tools and equipment that are required for the job?





Volunteers planting up a storm along the Meander River. Photo A.A. MacKinnon.

9. Have the action goals of the volunteers as shown in NRM catchment plans been achieved?
 - *Are there specific implementation goals for volunteers in the catchment or NRM plans?*
 - *Is there a measure to show that they have been achieved?*
10. Are the problem-solving capabilities of volunteers adequately utilised?
 - *Have the qualifications and skills of the volunteers been used to the fullest extent?*
 - *Are the tasks delegated overly ambitious or mundane for the volunteers in terms of their experience or qualification?*
11. Is there appropriate training and education for volunteers?
 - *Would training provide more effective deployment of volunteers or enhance volunteers' abilities?*
 - *Is there a plan or program for training and education of volunteers?*
12. Is there appropriate insurance in place for volunteers?
 - *What is in it?*
 - *Are the opportunities being provided? Are they being taken up?*
 - *Is there training for the managers of volunteers?*
13. Have the volunteers enjoyed their experiences individually?
 - *Has there been a workplace risk assessment?*
 - *What occupational health and safety policies are in place?*
 - *Are the policies and assessments current in terms of what people are actually doing?*
14. Have the volunteers enjoyed their experiences individually?
 - *What is the rate of turnover in the volunteer sector?*
 - *Is this acceptable?*
 - *Is morale high? How do you know?*
 - *Could the volunteer experience be enhanced?*



14. Have the social goals of volunteers been achieved?

- *What are the social goals of the volunteers?*
- *Is there conflict between or within volunteer roles or individuals?*
- *Are there internal or external social occasions? Are these well attended?*


15. What are the likely patterns of change in volunteerism in the next five years?

- *Are there likely to be any changes in patterns of employment and industry in the relevant area that will affect the likely availability of volunteers?*
- *Are there any new skills that are required and any old ones not required?*
- *Are the characteristics of the local population changing (e.g. age, number, employment, language etc.)? Will this affect the availability or management of volunteers?*

16. Has there been an adequate recognition of the variety of the drivers and global influences that could affect the mode and outcomes of volunteerism?

- *Is there conscious incorporation in catchment plans of global issues and trends which may affect catchment or NRM management (e.g. climate change, new international markets)?*
- *Will new production technology affect environmental management in the short or long term? Will this impact on volunteer roles?*
- *Will there be new environmental management technology that may affect the roles of volunteers?*

17. Do the answers to all of the above provide for flexibility and timely response to change while respecting the rights, roles and responsibilities of all parties?

- *Is there an agreement about the rights and responsibilities of all levels of governance and the volunteers?*
 - *Have specific roles and functions of volunteers been incorporated in the catchment or NRM plans?*
 - *Given the answers to the above questions is sufficient flexibility incorporated in the catchment and NRM plans to respond to the drivers of change?*
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