

Session 2: Off-reserve Conservation: Background, Vision and Philosophy For Community-based Conservation

Roger Good

Introduction

Community-based nature conservation, now commonly referred to as off-park conservation has been actively promoted in recent years, to the extent that many rural people hold the perception that it is a new approach by natural area land management agencies, principally the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC), to conserve native biota outside reserves.

This recognition, particularly within the rural community is a very significant response and hopefully will make a major contribution to the retention and maintenance of the little and sparsely distributed remnant native vegetation which exists in rural landscapes.

While community awareness of the need to retain native vegetation in rural landscapes has been raised by the recent 'push' for community conservation, the concept is not new and the perilous situation of many native vegetation communities and associated native fauna is to some extent, a result of the lack of servicing or follow up of earlier well founded community conservation programs initiated in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A long period occurred in the 1980s when little environmental awareness and community conservation was pursued or effectively implemented by the land management agencies, during which time many native vegetation communities declined in extent and distribution from low, but still representative, levels to very low, and non-representative, levels in the rural landscape. Many examples can be quoted but the White Box/Yellow Box woodlands and the Grassy White Box Woodlands are two significant examples.

These two communities once dominated the 400 to 700 mm rainfall belt of the Southwest Slopes and near Western Plains; the 'wheat belt' of southern and central NSW. Clearing of native vegetation from the 'wheat belt' commenced in the late 1800s and during the earlier part of the 1900s. A further sharp peak in clearing activity occurred as a response to the wool boom years of the 1950s.

Like so many other 'nation building' activities the long-term impacts of the ever-increasing land-clearing and development to support the wool and wheat industries were not recognised and by the 1970s the Box woodlands were reduced in area to less than 20 percent of their original extent. Unfortunately the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the reduction and eventual demise of most government agency and public company rural community extension services, with the consequent loss of many of the very good rural community conservation programs which had been commenced by the NSW Fauna Panel in the early 1960s and the 'infant' NPWS in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Over the past 10 to 15 years the extent of the White Box/Yellow Box woodland association has further declined through insidious clearing to less than five percent of its original (Pre 1750) area. Hence in this period of little extension service contact with the rural community, the White Box/Yellow Box woodlands declined from a level considered to be still representative (>15%) to one that borders on near extinction (<5%).

The threshold point between being able to acquire and establish reserves to conserve representative areas of the woodland and not having viable areas of woodland for conservation in reserves was reached. As almost all good patches of the White Box/Yellow Box woodland now occur on private freehold land, the communities' effective conservation will be almost totally dependent on the goodwill of rural landholders, the support of these landholders through sound advice on management, collaborative management and relevant incentives. The latter is generally considered in terms of financial incentives such as grants for fencing and rate relief but the

arguably most urgent and best incentive that can initially be given to rural community conservation programs is that of the provision of relevant information (knowledge incentives).

The philosophy behind community conservation

In this day and age the philosophy behind community based conservation articulated by the early proponents of the concept within the National Parks and Wildlife Service no doubt should be called the 'vision' or 'vision statement' for off-reserve nature conservation. In real terms the concept and development of off-reserve, community based nature conservation programs was never seen or recognised as a separate program or some new initiative as seems to be perceived by some landholders and even some staff within the land management agencies.

The basic concept and philosophy was (and remains) that all nature conservation is a community concern and issue, and hence off-reserve conservation is to be an integral part of all nature conservation endeavours. Nature conservation by acquisition of lands and protection of landscapes, biota and ecosystems within 'secure tenure' was as such also only a part of community conservation programs.

As reserve acquisition/establishment and off-reserve nature conservation was considered to be one integrated program, the emphasis was on environmental awareness and education. In the early years of the NPWS, environmental awareness and education was a high profile program which effectively linked all other nature conservation programs both on and off-reserves. These programs were very much based on working with the rural community, with a high level of confidence and trust in the commitment of rural landholders to co-operative and integrated nature conservation programs. The importance and benefits of meeting landholders on their patch and in their time was always recognised as essential to the success of collaborative and co-operative rural community conservation programs; the success being manifest in the many wildlife refuges established in the 1960s and 1970s.

The community conservation programs were made a little easier in the 1960s and early 1970s than in later years as reserve establishment was primarily based on the transfer of vacant Crown lands to the NPWS. This was generally accepted by the community, and only engendered negative responses from some landholders who directly adjoined the new reserve areas. Interestingly the establishment of any conservation reserve or protected area was perceived by these landholders as initiating or bringing with it feral animal and weed problems, even though these generally existed in the areas prior to transfer, often with little or no management input.

The transfer or acquisition of as much quality public land as possible in the short-term was to eventually dominate the NPWS conservation programs and direction, at the expense of and decline in community extension and education programs at the very time when these programs were most needed. This was for example evident in the many wildlife refuge signs that hung off farm gates or fences in a poor state of repair.

Most importantly though, the benefits of community conservation, inspired by nature conservation awareness and education programs had been established, from which the 'new' off-reserve concepts and ethos have evolved, to once again be an important component of effective nature conservation across the landscape.

The new 'vision'

The new vision of the NPWS off-reserve conservation program is little different from that of the first community conservation, awareness and education programs established in the 1960s and 1970s, but the implementation is more focussed on incentive programs such as voluntary conservation agreements with landholders to protect remnant vegetation on farms. These programs are an essential part of off-reserve nature conservation but are only a part of community conservation.

The basis of off-reserve conservation on rural lands must remain environmental education programs that provide for the maintenance of viable agricultural industries within ecologically sustainable management practices that ensure the conservation and protection of the remnant native biota. The voluntary conservation agreement (VCA) program and other similar programs, provide a mechanism for this to occur but like all successful rural incentive programs it runs the risk of being almost self-defeating. The greater the number of conservation agreements the more difficult it will be to fund and effectively service each conservation agreement. Part of the servicing is that of continuing contact with each landholder and the provision of environmental and management information and this will decline with an increasing number of voluntary conservation agreements.

A more strategic approach to programs such as the VCA program will have to be taken in the near future to determine where and how many conservation agreements or similar, can effectively be serviced. A threshold will also be reached in the near future, when a decision will have to be made as to what is an appropriate level of servicing in terms of the continual provision of ecological and management information.

The latter is most important as the provision of ecological and management information is arguably more important than the provision of financial incentives. The 'information incentive' has more long-term benefits than one-off financial incentives and helps build upon the general high level of commitment and desire to participate in on-farm nature conservation that many rural landholders express. To address this, greater resources will have to be committed in the future to community education and awareness programs.

Collaborative and inter-agency rural conservation programs such as Farming for the Future are partly fulfilling this role, but are focussed principally on ecologically sustainable agriculture with on-farm conservation of remnant vegetation and habitats being but a part.

While the current off-reserve community conservation programs of the NPWS are principally rural orientated in terms of on-farm incentive programs, other community based natural area management programs are being pursued through community interest groups and non-government conservation groups such as Landcare. An example of this is that of the NPWS and other agencies providing physical and some financial support to local interest groups to manage small parcels of vacant public land that would otherwise not be considered for reserve status due to size, or degree of degradation of the vegetation or soils.

Several other core programs of the NPWS such as the threatened species recovery planning program, wetland management programs and cooperative environmental planning programs are all having an impact in terms of the retention of remnant native vegetation, wildlife corridors, rehabilitation of habitats, and threatened species survival within and outside the reserve system. These programs are therefore also contributing to effective off-reserve conservation, and in most situations involve community participation or support.

Success to date of off-reserve conservation programs

Success of the off-reserve conservation program has to date been generally measured in the number of VCAs etc, that have been signed-up and implemented. Arguably more importantly, success should be measured in terms of changes in attitudes to on-farm nature conservation and the increasing desire of the wider rural community to participate in such programs as a response to community education and awareness programs. The following summarises the current status of community off-reserve conservation programs in which the NPWS is actively participating or co-ordinating.

The Wildlife Refuge Program

There are currently over 600 wildlife refuges declared in NSW but of recent years few new wildlife refuges have been established. The Wildlife Refuge program is currently being re-

viewed to re-establish the program as a core part of off-reserve conservation and to ensure a more effective and beneficial program for landholders establishing wildlife refuges over part or all of their properties.

Voluntary Conservation Agreement Program (VCAs)

There are currently 81 VCAs formally implemented in NSW covering over 6500 ha of land. The largest VCA is one of approximately 2000ha, near Cooma. The largest group of VCAs is located near Wyndham where 20 rural landholders have signed individual VCAs as a group, to protect a wildlife corridor to the South East Forests National Park. Thirty four VCAs have been signed and implementation commenced during the past twelve months.

The 'Voluntary Conservation Agreement Guidelines' are also currently being reviewed and it is planned to change the name of the VCA Guidelines to "Conservation Partnerships Guidelines" which will include information on Wildlife Refuges, Land for Wildlife and Ramsar Wetlands.

The Environmental Trust recently provided funding for a joint project between the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers (ATCV) and NPWS to send groups of volunteers to properties covered by a VCA or Wildlife Refuge, to undertake on-ground activities. The first group of volunteers recently carried out works on the property of Ros and Garth Dixon located near Michelago.

The NPWS recently was also granted funds from the Native Vegetation Management Fund to provide assistance to landholders with VCAs, to undertake on-ground works to protect high conservation value, remnant native vegetation. Almost \$500,000 has been allocated to landholders with VCAs to undertake activities such as fencing, revegetation, rehabilitation of native vegetation, weed control, erosion control and some feral animal control.

Land for Wildlife

The NPWS has established a co-operative program with the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife, the Nature Conservation Council, Greening Australia, and DLWC and has received funds from the Commonwealth Government to implement a Revolving Fund in NSW for the purchase, covenanting and where appropriate, the sale of some lands acquired. The NPWS will provide expert advice on priority target areas and properties available for purchase or potential purchase.

Farming for the Future - Biodiversity Enhancement Project

This Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funded project, to enhance biodiversity issues in property management planning (PMP) is developing and disseminating information that enhances the existing nature conservation component of the Farming for the Future PMP workshop series. Resource material to support facilitators in the delivery of the nature conservation component of the workshop series is currently being developed.

Ramsar Wetland Nominations

A partnership project between the NPWS, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the National Parks Association (NPA), has been established to nominate additional wetlands in NSW to the Ramsar Convention. During 1999 three new sites were listed, bringing the total number of Ramsar-listed sites in NSW to nine. One of these sites, the Gwydir wetlands, was the first nomination to the Convention by a rural landholder. Another privately-owned wetland has recently been nominated and listed to the Convention resulting in an extension to the existing Macquarie Marshes Ramsar site. The project partners are working collaboratively with these landholders to develop and implement management plans for these listed sites.

Bushcare and Bushcare Network

Bushcare Facilitators are now based in the NPWS as well as a number of other host agencies including Catchment Management Committees, a Rural Lands Protection Board, the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers and Greening Australia. The Facilitators are providing support to, and coordinating the regional delivery of Bushcare programs, and linking Bushcare programs to activities in the agencies and other organisations. The NPWS is increasingly linking NHT projects to activities such as the implementation of recovery plans, voluntary conservation agreements, and land for wildlife.

Conservation Management Network (CMN)

The Conservation Management Network (CMN) has been established by the NPWS to assist the conservation of highly fragmented ecological communities that are poorly protected in the existing reserve system. The model has been trialed for the past two years in the Grassy Box Woodlands of the western slopes of NSW.

The project is a joint initiative of NPWS and Ecological Interactions (Drs Suzanne Prober and Kevin Thiele), with steering committee representatives from DLWC, Local Government, CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology, Environment Australia, WWF, and the State Council of the Rural Lands Protection Boards. The project is funded through the NHT National Reserve System Program, and NPWS.

The CMN model aims to redress the poor conservation status of fragmented ecological communities by providing an overarching, targeted framework to coordinate the protection and management of remnants. The CMN is a network of remnants and their owners or managers, and other interested individuals. It is managed by NPWS staff who will provide ecological and management advice to landholders and coordinate formal protection arrangements and communications among members. A network newsletter is to be published regularly and a website and database will be established.

The CMN encourages the continued ownership and management of remnants by their current owners, but at the same time promotes formal commitments to conservation goals. The CMN can accommodate remnants protected by a variety of mechanisms, both government and non-government, including VCAs, Joint Management Agreements, and listing on Local Environment Plans.

The Grassy Box Woodlands CMN for example will include remnants from private land, cemeteries, travelling stock reserves, road and rail easements, town commons, and reserves managed by NPWS, Councils, Trusts and DLWC.

The CMN model also allows for delivery of conservation of endangered ecological communities. It provides an important conservation tool for structuring the recovery planning process and a framework for the targeted implementation of the VCA and Land for Wildlife schemes. Grassy White Box Woodlands and the Natural Grasslands of the Southern Tablelands of NSW and ACT are already listed as endangered ecological communities under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and are under consideration by the NSW Scientific Committee for listing under the *NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act*.

The Grassy Box Woodlands CMN provides an appropriate model for conservation of other fragmented ecological communities both in NSW and other parts of Australia. A similar approach to the Grassy Box Woodlands CMN is being taken to conserve grassland and grassy woodland remnants on the Southern Tablelands of NSW in a project managed by the NPWS Southern Directorate Threatened Species Unit.

Other incentive initiatives for off-reserve conservation - new taxation incentives

The recently passed Taxation Laws Amendment Bill (No. 8), will provide for a new suite of nature conservation options. In summary these options provide:

- An income tax deduction, which can be spread over five years, for donations of land worth more than \$5000 to registered environmental organisations.
- Capital gains tax exemption for property left in wills to organisations such as Bush Heritage.

A review of the CSIRO report "Philanthropy: Sustaining the Land" is to be undertaken in the near future, with a view to extending tax deductibility incentives for conservation. Initiatives that may be included are tax concessions for:

- Any fall in dollar value for land protected with an irrevocable conservation covenant;
- The difference between the price received and land value for "bargain sales of land" for conservation purposes;
- Donation of land with retained rights of occupation for the resident's lifetime;
- Extension of the Landcare rebate for management works on convenanting properties.

Passage of these amendments will greatly increase the opportunities for the protection of off-reserve lands for nature conservation.

Summary

The concept and philosophy for off-reserve or community based nature conservation, particularly orientated towards rural landholders have been in existence for many years but have only of recent years gained a new impetus for implementation as a core program of the NPWS. Considerable success has been achieved in collaboration with other land management agencies, non-government conservation groups and rural community groups. Success can also be attributed to the many landholders who have recognised the need for on-farm conservation of remnant native vegetation and habitats as an integral part of sustainable and viable agricultural enterprises.

While considerable progress has been made, much remains to be achieved in off-reserve conservation and every effort must be made to sustain the program as it achieves more and more. As with all such successful rural programs it runs the risk of losing impetus as the post-establishment demands for servicing of on-farm increase commensurate with increasing acceptance and implementation of the on-farm conservation programs.

Similarly off-reserve conservation is more than just on-farm nature conservation and programs and initiatives of the wider rural community and community interest groups must be further encouraged as support of on-farm and other off-reserve programs.

Acknowledgment

The assistance of NPWS staff from Head Office in the preparation of this paper is acknowledged. (Rachelle Carritt, Rochelle Callaghan, Samantha Hampton and Deborah Stevenson)