

Queensland Coastal Conference 2011

The Nature of the Beast and Who's Who in the Zoo

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The Pullman Reef Hotel, Cairns

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INTRODUCTION

Community Natural Resource Management (NRM) is a relatively new phenomenon that provides a process and framework for community organisations, volunteers, business, institutions and government to work together to manage Australia's natural assets and achieve a sustainable future. It is best demonstrated by the evolving Landcare ethic, and the acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land.

'The Landcare approach comprises:

- *a philosophy, influencing the way people live in the landscape while caring for the land*
- *local community action putting the philosophy into practice*
- *a range of knowledge generation, sharing and support mechanisms including groups, networks (from district to national levels), facilitators and coordinators, government and non-government programs and partnerships.'*¹

For the purposes of this presentation, I will refer to the 'phenomenum' of community based natural resource management as the 'beast'; this new living thing that is nearly 25 years old following 'an historic agreement between the National Farmers Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation in 1988' (Landcare Queensland 2011)², and attempt to explain to a new volunteer the nature of this beast.

BACKGROUND

In 1998 I was strolling along Tin Can Bay foreshore with our 2 young girls aged 6 and 3. We came upon a happy crew who were planting little trees along a drainage ditch to the bay. We joined the crew because there is no greater joy for young kids than to play by the sea in sand, mud and rainsaver gel! The fellow in charge recorded our details and I signed along the dotted line. Little did I know that this was to be the beginning of a whole new education and career in Coastal Natural Resource Management.

I was fortunate in the fact that I learned and participated along the way with the evolution of Landcare and Coastcare from the very first allocation of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) from the sale of Telstra. Coastcare was alive and well at Tin Can Bay and Rainbow Beach, and was enabled as a result of the strategic planning work of the former Widgee and Cooloola Shire Councils. This level of strategic planning is vital to support the direction of local on-ground groups, and is referred to in

'Key Element 4: Links to plans at all levels' in the Australian Landcare Framework Action Plan 2011- 'Providing for Landcare (& Coastcare) in planning processes will strengthen opportunities for Landcare groups and ensure that the outcomes of Landcare are recognised and acknowledged.' (Walker 2011)³

Then came the dividing up of the country, including Queensland, into catchments and the establishment of catchment or Regional Bodies/Groups; followed closely by reforms to the Associations and Incorporations Acts and Public Liability Insurance requirements⁴.

For a new volunteer, there seemed to be a plethora of 'new rules', changes and funding buckets. For someone to happen upon this beast now, as I did 13 years ago, I imagine it would appear a strange creature, as they would not have an inkling of where it came from, how it arrived or indeed why it intends to stay!

What new volunteer for instance, would know that the Australian Landcare Council (ALC) is appointed by the federal minister? And that the National Landcare Facilitator (NLF) provides a communication link between 'grass roots' Landcare, national primary industry, Australian Government agencies and community organisations? That there are also Regional Landcare Facilitators (RLF's). Further, that the National Landcare Network (NLN) is totally separate and has a differing role than Landcare Australia Limited (LAL); as do Queensland Water and Land Carers (QWaLC); Landcare Queensland (LQ) and the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective!

Queensland Water and Land Carers was formed in 2003, to speak for the Queensland beast, to governments and other organisations and protect volunteers through insurance.

QWaLCs ROLE

As Queensland's peak body for NRM volunteers, QWaLC fulfills the following roles on behalf of its membership of over 30,000 people in 11 Queensland catchments, represented by an elected board member from each catchment.

Advocacy

No other body exists in Queensland to advocate specifically on behalf of NRM volunteers. The volunteer NRM sector is vital to the Queensland economy, producing vast amounts of work with no labour costs. QWaLC works hard to ensure that this contribution is an important consideration in any decisions made regarding the sector.

← Advocating to the Australian Government for the needs of volunteer NRM groups in regards to Caring for our Country program, and the lack of recognition and acknowledgement of the role of the community Landcare in that funding program. This is a vital issue for all NRM volunteers, as it will determine how funding is distributed in the future.

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← Advocating on behalf of all volunteer NRM groups regarding their insurance coverage. This includes keeping excesses to a minimum. QWaLC has, as directed by its members in previous years, negotiated a reduction from a \$10,000 excess to a \$1,000; increased the level of income for member groups from \$100,000 to \$200,000 to maintain their eligibility for the insurance coverage, and increased the age coverage from 70 to 90yrs.

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Representation

QWaLC represents the Queensland volunteer NRM sector to federal, state and local government, regional bodies, industry and anywhere issues arise that will impact on NRM volunteers.

Steering committee representation, such as the Queensland Coastal Conference, CoastInfo website, and the Queensland Landcare Conference.. The coastal conference and CoastInfo projects are an important step in closing the information gap for the majority of volunteer NRM groups whose work benefits coastal environments.

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QWaLC also provides a float to enable community Landcare groups to host the Landcare Conference in odd-numbered years. QWaLC believes it's important for the conference to remain focused on volunteer groups, and the best way to achieve this is to encourage individual groups to host the conference.

Networking

QWaLC maintains a vast NRM network that encompasses volunteer NRM groups, regional bodies, government representatives and industry personnel. Due to demand for access to this network, QWaLC has introduced free associate membership for interested individuals.

Promotion

QWaLC is proud to promote the achievements of NRM volunteers.

← QWaLC is funded by Landcare Australia to coordinate the Queensland Landcare Awards. This is the state's most prestigious Awards process, with many regional and industry winners entering for the chance to then be considered for a National Landcare Award. QWaLC dedicates hundreds of hours to the Landcare Awards, ensuring that all NRM volunteers can enter and have their projects considered.

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← QWaLC provides media coverage of the achievements of NRM volunteers. Media releases are regularly distributed to NRM-specific media and the broader media arena. However, these releases often focus on the achievements of the groups rather than QWaLC, and that fits in with our role of promoting our volunteers rather than ourselves.

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Insurance

As a result of our understanding of the needs of NRM volunteers, the Department Environment and Resource management (DERM) entrusts QWaLC with the administration of three insurance policies. This involves a considerable commitment of time and resources, involving:

Responding to hundreds of email and phone insurance enquiries. This can include contacting groups or the insurance broker for specific information. It also requires following up with groups to ensure that they received the information they needed.

Registration of members

← Processing registrations for membership is a detailed process involving distributing applications, receiving applications, making sure the applications are complete, sending copies of the applications to the various assessment panels, getting the applications returned. Once a Landcare group has been registered as a member they are eligible for the insurance coverage, and the policies are distributed to the new groups.

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Ensuring a fair process.

Sometimes groups are rejected for membership by the panel. QWaLC then advocates on behalf of those groups to make sure that the assessors' decision was fully informed. In previous years, QWaLC has achieved a reversal of the assessors' initial decision to result in three previously rejected groups becoming members and therefore being covered by insurance. This means a considerable cost-saving for the groups, who otherwise are unable to afford insurance, and might have had to cancel their NRM activities.

Incidents Case Studies

Case 1

A volunteer under the jurisdiction of a State Government Department was working on a Landcare project. A chemical in use on the site made contact with the volunteer's eye, resulting in loss of sight in one eye.

A claim for compensation was made under the QWaLC Policy, but was later withdrawn, as a similar claim was made to the Government Department's insurer.

This case presents a jurisdictional issue ie. The claimant was required to be a participating volunteer at a Landcare Project site.
End result: the claimant was compensated, but not through QWaLC.

Case 2

A volunteer suffered injury when struck by a boat propellor while en route to a Coastcare Project. The Coastcare Project Officer carried out a risk assessment, provided volunteers with a written copy of the assessment which they signed, including boating safety. The volunteer was claiming for negligence.

End result: The injured volunteer withdrew his claim of Coastcare Project negligence, due to the Coastcare Officer having fulfilled his responsibilities. This case however, does leave the boat operator exposed to liability.

Case 3

A claim for compensation and reimbursement of expenses was made under the QWaLC policy by a volunteer without advising the Landcare group committee or Landcare Officer (Reporting the incident).

The volunteer wasn't the actual claimant, but was making the claim on behalf of another volunteer. The claimant received treatment from a major centre specialist without being referred by a medical authority.

End result: the claimant was compensated as per the QWaLC policy, which does not include travelling expenses and accommodation of persons accompanying the claimant.

DISCUSSION

People volunteer at various levels and under various arrangements and modes of travel. One size does not fit all, and there is a growing need for volunteers, project managers, organisations and Government officers to have a good understanding of jurisdictional issues.

The beast is growing and now covering more ground, but often there are overlaps.

Who's who in the zoo?

As stated earlier, Landcare was formally established in 1988. *'Since that time, several thousands of groups have sprung up all over the country, giving people the opportunity to come together for the benefit of our land, water and biodiversity'* (Landcare Qld 2011).

As well as local and catchment scale NRM groups, other single interests groups are growing and covering more territory. These include (but are not limited to) the 'Planet Ark National Tree Dayers', 'Shorebirders', 'Oceanwatchers', 'Mangroviewatchers' 'Seagrasswatchers', 'Wetlandcarers', QWaLC's Green Nomads'; and can vary in capacity from local to international recognition. These interest groups, comprise a loose association of often changing single participant volunteers who often have little or no knowledge of NRM; to local well-informed NRM groups, and / or business interests. The interest group most often has an email and website address as "dot.org" but in reality can be best described as a single interest *program with various projects* as opposed to an NRM catchment *organisation*. Some groups, however are incorporated not-for-profits eg.

*'OceanWatch Australia works across Australia in partnership with seafood industry sectors, federal and state governments, natural resource managers, private enterprise and local communities.'*⁵

while others clearly stipulate they are responsible for running a program only:

*'Insurance liability cover has been an important issue since Seagrass-Watch started in 1998. Participants are instructed to be part of an established group or incorporated body etc **before** they can participate.*

When a group is established, they are advised that Seagrass-Watch HQ only provides technical support and does not direct local on-ground activities (with the exception of Reef Rescue MMP (<http://www.seagrasswatch.org/sampling.html>)). As Seagrass-Watch HQ does not direct local on-

ground activities, it is the responsibility of the participant/local coordinator "To ensure the volunteer group has adequate insurance cover" ⁶

Out in the field this translates to "Who is responsible for public liability?" aka Accident Insurance?

Example 1:

A regional catchment organisation employs an Oceanwatch staff. Oceanwatch is based in Sydney, but is on a mission to build capacity with its key stakeholders, ie fisherfolk of all persuasions, bait and tackle businesses and existing NRM organisations within the catchment. The regional Oceanwatch staffer decides to organise an "ocean cleanup day" at various locations within the catchment and groups and individuals being NRM or not, are encouraged to participate.

Who is accepting liability?

What provisions are in place to inform volunteers of who is managing the project?

And has the Oceanwatch staffer actually thought to ask if any of the local NRM groups already offer this activity?

Example 2:

A Coastcare group has been holding regular working bees on a foredune to remove weeds and provide infil planting of native dune species under an old and agreed council foreshore management plan that aimed to protect the dune while providing public access via board and chain walkways, as well as providing viewing platforms to take in the ocean view.

The plan was never formally adopted by the council, but there was an informal understanding and agreement that this plan would guide onground work. The group won many NRM awards for their work. The council amalgamated in 2008 and the new council had never met the beast before (or at least turned a blind eye). There is also no elected coastal division representation anymore; the foreshore management plan is all but obsolete, one of the viewing platforms and several access boardwalks have washed away in storms but the group carry on regardless removing foredune weeds and occasional infil planting.

A new group of residents arrive on the coast, see the non-uniformed Coastcare group doing their thing, so ask council if it would be OK if their 'group' could also help 'cleanup' the foreshore. This is given the OK by a couple of councillors and park staff, so the 'cleanup' group meets regularly on the foreshore to destroy habitat, plant local species in straight rows and above all else, ensure there is a clear view to the sea, to prevent loitering delinquents and minimise the snake and pedophile population from frequenting the foreshore!

Who is accepting liability?

What provisions are in place to inform volunteers of who is managing these clean-up projects?

And has the councillor and/or staffer actually thought to find out why the local NRM group already offer this activity?

The Coastcare group has public liability and accident insurance through QWaLC, being registered as an established and recognised NRM group with the consent of council to continue their work; the latter group is a council responsibility, that begs the question:

Why would you condone opposing groups competing with each other on a public foreshore for 2 totally different management outcomes? (But that is a topic for another paper).

Example 3:

Two grey nomads average age 65, travelling north up the coast, join a local Coastcare group for a 'Dog Walkers Breakfast' and learn all about the Ramsar Wetland they are travelling through and its annual migratory shorebirds. They take their dog for a walk willingly on a supplied free dog lead, have a free bacon and egg muffin breakfast, and because of this new knowledge and friendship will henceforth become 'green nomads'.

But with no education in their previous city lives about catchments, the natural environment and/or indigenous history and culture these new grey-green nomads are embarking on a jourey to get to know the beast, so lets hope we can make that an easy and enjoyable experience.

CONCLUSION

As previously stated: One size does not fit all, and there is a growing need for volunteers, project managers, organisations and government officers to have a good understanding of jurisdictional issues.

Volunteer responsibility: volunteers should make themselves aware of and understand the aims/objects of the group that they are volunteering for, and whether the group has insurance. They need to advise project officers if they have any pre-existing conditions. They should report any incidence as soon as practicable to the organisation, or the organisation's officer.

NRM group responsibility: should have a Workplace Health and Safety Policy and Procedure and regularly inform their members of its existence. The Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) manual *In Safe Hands* is an excellent document for this purpose. The group or organisation should ensure that their project officers have had safety training.

Program offering responsibility: If a 'program' officer is providing on-ground projects or events for volunteer participation, then 'as above' applies and either provide insurance cover OR communicate clearly to volunteers its provisions.

Catchment Organisation responsibility: Catchment organisations should understand the capacity of their local groups and their often changing circumstances, and can often offer support to build capacity. In order for this not to appear as a 'top down' instruction, it is always useful to 'Ask first' before developing projects that require local community group participation.

Council responsibility: For effective NRM projects and partnerships on council controlled land, a planning policy and on-ground plan is essential, otherwise there is no consistent NRM objective or strategy for implementation. Councils should be clear on regional catchment plans and seek confirmation of local NRM organisational objects and experience, executive committee members, organisation strategy, along with proof of insurance cover.

Above all, effective communication processes will benefit both long term NRM projects and the volunteers who deliver them.

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