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The Australian Rangeland Society

From LSP to ILP and all the acronyms in between—transforming an organisation

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Abstract

How does an NRM group transform from being a relatively simple project/contract delivery organisation—a conduit of government funds, a ‘funding bucket’—to an organisation that provides holistic program development and delivery which has problem solving and innovation at its centre? All with a sociologist as a CEO?

Join Gaye to hear about the journey that Rangelands NRM WA has taken over the last three years to transform the way it sees itself, how others see it and how we do things. To make any kind of difference working in the expansive WA rangelands, we need to think landscape and as soon as we do that we need to think across tenure. People need to be empowered to look after their own patch and they also need to work together in a strategic way to ensure efforts are sustainable.

Gaye will briefly explore the theories and concepts that have helped shape the thinking behind the transformation. Also, perhaps more importantly, she will demonstrate how by being guided by a set of values rather than a set of rules has enabled the organisation to have the freedom to learn and adapt—a process which has resulted in deep learning for staff and those who we have worked closely with. It is a journey that has taken us from priority areas to LSP to LSC to CI and finally to ILP.

Rangelands NRM is a not-for-profit, non-political and neutral organisation working towards better WA rangelands. We connect people and projects so that real solutions can develop. We coordinate effort and resources so that the maximum results are achieved on the ground. We work with organisations to deliver on ground results. We believe if we work together, we can achieve better results.

Keywords

Landscape-scale; rangeland communities; collaboration; sustainability; collective impact; organisational change

Introduction

The Rangelands NRM region in WA is vast. It covers 2.3 million square kms—that includes nearly 90 million hectares of pastoral leases, over 70 million hectares of exclusive native title as well as other tenure such as the Conservation estate, unallocated crown land and mining tenements. It has a large diversity of landscapes from the Nullarbor in the south through to the sub tropics of the Kimberley in the north. It experiences weather events—from droughts to cyclones. The threats are also large. Bushfires that burn out millions of hectares, large herds of herbivores, large infestations of weeds. Mesquite covers more than 800 square km of the Pilbara – 81,000 ha on one station. Costs of delivery are expensive. A return flight from Perth to Karratha can cost the same as from flying from Perth to London. A normal trip for our Regional Landcare Facilitator (RLF) in the southern rangelands can be 1000 kms – all before you even start to look at delivery.

A few things in our region are, however, small. The population is sparse and mostly gathered around regional centres on the coast. Our core funding under Caring for Our Country (CfoC) and the National Landcare Programme (NLP) has been about the same (or less) than other NRM groups that cover a fraction of that land mass. And we have always had limited staff; currently we have 11 full time staff and two very part time.

So, taking all this into consideration how can a small NRM group achieve – and demonstrate – sustainable outcomes across such a huge landscape?

We can't alone.

But we can by facilitating the people of the rangelands to work together.

Prioritisation and processes

In the early days, during the National Heritage Trust (NHT), National Action Program (NAP) and early CfoC, we adopted a 'vegemite' approach to delivery that was focused on distributing funds and getting projects completed. It soon became evident, both to the federal government and to ourselves that this approach was not going to make any sustainable difference to the huge landscape of the rangelands. Small, short term projects that focused only on environmental outcomes (or more likely outputs) were not going to make a dent in the huge issues that the WA rangelands faced.

We realised that to make a difference, we need to support people to look after their own patch of the rangelands. To look after their own Country.

Over time, we have built an immense knowledge of the WA rangelands, its people and a good understanding of the problems and opportunities that face the region.

The first thing we did was to define who our core people or 'clients' were. While other NRM groups work extensively with volunteers and the public, we believe our focus should be on the people who could make decisions about the land, the land managers – pastoralists, Traditional Owners (TOs) and government agencies. The pastoral estate and Native Title determined estate alone cover over 160 million hectares, so this was the way that we could make the biggest impact in the region.

The second thing was to define our 'Priority Areas' during the development of our Regional Plan in 2012/13. Using the INFERR™ process, we identified environmental assets that are priorities for investment through a combination of careful planning, research and community consultation. These areas were chosen not just for their environmental assets but also if there were engaged land managers to make things happen.

Our thinking of how to maximise impact within priority areas was influenced by Landscape Scale Project (LSP) and Collective Impact (CI) theory and processes. These areas needed to be big enough to make an impact on the landscape, but small enough that the people who lived there could own the issues and solutions. We also wanted to drive ownership of the projects and programs from the ground up rather than going in with predetermined projects.

To this end we developed a three step process (Figure 1) which was derived from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) consultation model. This took familiar activities or events and put them into a process of moving people from networking through to problem solving and eventually co-ordinated delivery. For example, while we previously might have had a workshop or field day as a stand-alone event, we now also use such an event as an opportunity to listen for common issues or opportunities that participants were raising. We then offer to facilitate a process of getting these people together to discuss the problems, bring in other expertise and knowledge and develop innovative solutions including projects or initiatives that can be delivered in a co-ordinated way. Funding can then be sought to support these initiatives that are grown and owned by the people who are responsible for completing them.

Internally, we initially coined our approach 'Innovative Landscape Collaborations' or LSCs which then evolved to Innovative Landscape Projects (ILPs) and then Innovative Landscape Programs which luckily has the same acronym. This three letter acronym (TLA) disguises a complex approach which includes the area of land we are going to focus on, the people and organisations we need to support and coordinate and the approach to leveraging effort and funds and attracting new funds to the landscape effort.

Supporting people to look after their own patch

At Rangelands NRM we believe that our role is to support people to look after their own patch so we put people at the centre of what we do. We have two key ways that we do this – by providing opportunities for people to learn, innovate and work together and by seeding and supporting the development of groups.

Working together. One of our key messages is 'the rangelands is vast—to make any kind of difference we need to think landscape and once we do we think across tenure, we need people to work together'. The way that happens is very much determined by the issue and the people involved. Sometimes it will be driven by a cohesive organised group, at other times it is a network of people who rarely come together and at other times we can have people working towards a common goal separately (e.g. coordinated fire management). Bringing people together enables the sharing of knowledge and learnings and also the sharing of resources to save on time and cost. Essentially we connect, co-ordinate and deliver. We **connect** people and projects so innovative community driven solutions can develop. We seek ways to maximise results through **co-ordination** and resources. We work with local people and organisations to **deliver** on ground results.

Seeding/supporting groups. Over the years, we have supported the development of new and fledgling groups who can grow and look after their own patch. In the beginning this involved us helping develop a small project and assisting with funding applications and reporting, through to providing money for planning processes (e.g. Healthy Country Plans), providing Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) systems or even auspicng projects when they seek money from other sources. These groups can then develop and be part of coordinated activities in their area. Where groups don't exist, we seed/support new ones.

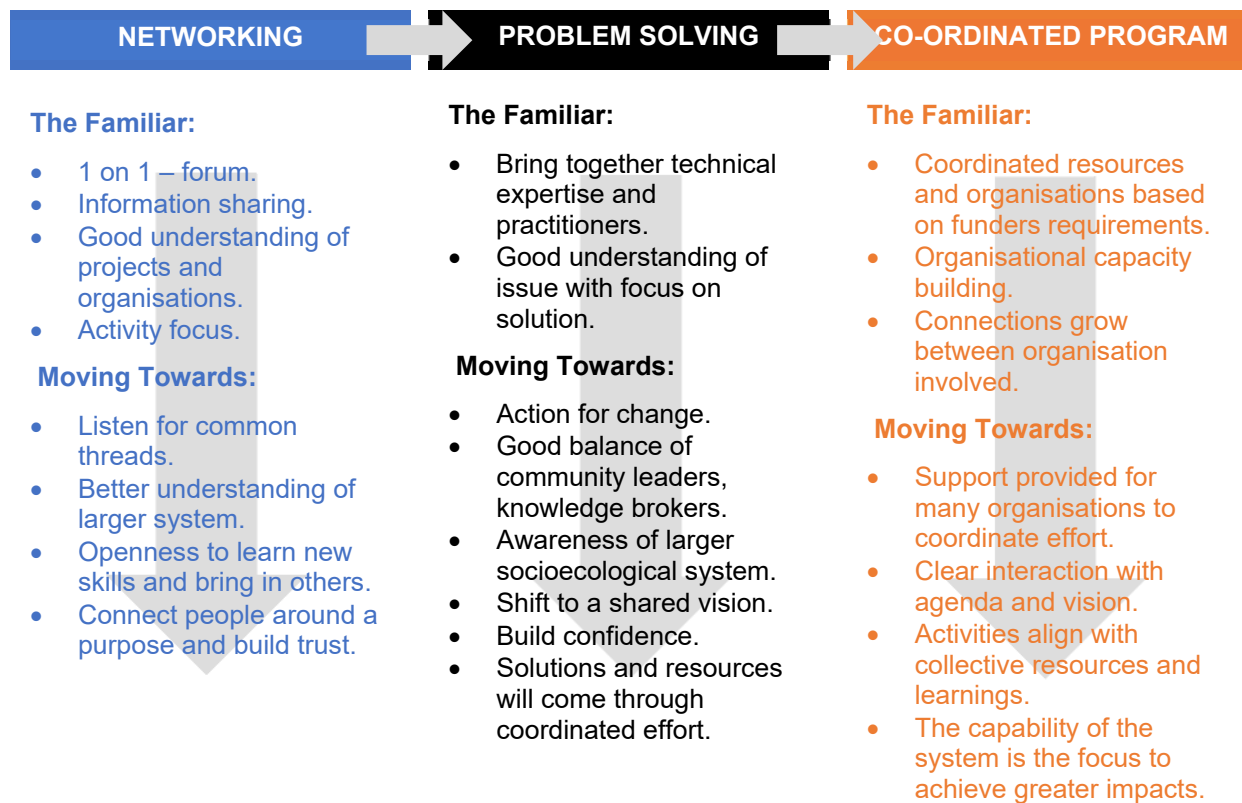


Figure 1: Three-step process for facilitation

People are part of the system

The most important thing for us is that people are not a ‘means to an end’—we don’t just work with people to deliver a project or a technical solution. We recognise that people are part of the system – they live and work on the land and the decisions they make impact that land.

Over the last three years, we have transitioned from delivering localised environmental projects and building capacity of individual community groups to holistic (triple-bottom-line) co-ordinated programs. This has involved a significant investment in the capability of Rangelands NRM staff and community ‘champions’ to enable them to better draw from contemporary processes in collaboration maturity.

This alternative approach has been driven by a social scientist – myself, so it has been quite a different journey to the normal science-driven approach! Putting the ‘people’ side of NRM at the centre has meant finding links and synergies between people, ideas and activities, and finding space to allow ‘collective intelligence’ to do its thing. As stated above, people are part of the system, not a means to an end (to get the project delivered or deliver a technical solution).

The development of our expertise and community engagement has enabled a more realistic and workable approach to tackling the lack of coordination and the sustainability issues in the region. It has enabled large-scale collaborative efforts, bringing people together to share ideas and collaborate, and increasing the likelihood of making a difference over the vast areas in the rangelands.