

# A COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE COASTAL COMMUNITY GROUPS: BEACHCARE

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## Introduction

Community engagement has been one of the essential key components in the success of coastal community groups. To date, there are approximately 60 000 active volunteers and 2000 registered groups in the Australian Government Coast Care program (Coast Care, 2010). Tackling problems such as dune erosion, coastal flora and fauna conservation, storm water pollution and human access issues, with on ground works by volunteers is the means for a sustainable and healthier coastal environment. With projected impacts from climate change affecting the coastal environment, community participation in coastal management has never been so paramount.

The Gold Coast City Council has addressed these urgencies by supporting a free coast care program called BeachCare, which is a community engagement program facilitated by Griffith Centre for Coastal Management. On the dunes nearly every weekend, BeachCare encourages local community members to care for their local beach, provides technical advice and establishes self-sufficient dune care groups (requiring little direct funding). Providing a 'non-bureaucratic work culture' and bridging the gap between government bodies and cross-scale partners, BeachCare communicates the latest research and issues into the community via proactive dune care activities.

Since the establishment of the Program in 2005, community participation in dune care has doubled annually and now actively manages activities on 10 dunal systems. BeachCare has adapted to the evolving coast care movement, setting an adaptive engagement model to encourage many stakeholders to contribute to the beach environment. With minimal funding BeachCare is now on the news, in the news and is the news and by utilising passionate marketing, e.g. 'care for your local beach with BeachCare', engages with the community during or after storm events and continually corresponds with a diverse community and corporate network. A fundamental strategy is enthusing those hidden pearls within the community: that key person; however maintaining program momentum is the ultimate key to successful and sustainable coastal community groups.

This paper highlights how BeachCare has adopted an adaptive engagement model to achieve a diversified network, maintain an on-ground program and increase community participation. Outlining the partnership with Surfrider Foundation as a case study, limitations and successes show how a cooperative approach for sustainable coastal community groups achieves aims and outcomes for the integrity and health of Gold Coast's dune environment.

## **Coast Care on the Gold Coast**

Our coastline needs to be protected to maintain a sustainable coastal environment. Coastal vegetation is a key component to the management of the coastline, as it provides a natural barrier against environmental variables, habitat for coastal flora and fauna and stabilise the coastline via the capture of wind-blow sand. Coast care on the Gold Coast promotes the necessity for the need to care, with the establishment of three primary dune care initiatives, Friends of Federation Walk, Gold Coast City Council's Bushland to Beaches program and Griffith Centre for Coastal Management Coastal Community Engagement Program called BeachCare. Over the last decade, the Gold Coast has seen a shift of community members taking action in coastal planning and decision-making processes, which has been set adjacent to the ever changing coastline. Contributing to the Australian Government's Coast Care program, coast care activities on the Gold Coast occur nearly every weekend, visioning a healthier coastal environment for generations to come.

### **BeachCare**

BeachCare is a key coastal community engagement program within the highly urbanised coastal city of the Gold Coast, Australia (Lazarow & Osborn, 2008 and Edwards & Kirkpatrick, 2010). Established in 2005, BeachCare is facilitated by Griffith Centre for Coastal Management (GCCM), under the provision of Gold Coast City Council (GCCC). BeachCare visions sustainable social inclusion in coastal management and furthers the coastal caring word into the community, by engaging in coastal management through dune care activities and the development of 'self-sufficient' community dune care groups (requiring little direct funding). On the dunes nearly every weekend, all community participation is volunteered and includes the restoration and maintenance of a local dune system under the direction of BeachCare – 'yes that is a native and, no that is not a native.'

### **Where and how we care?**

BeachCare currently manages 10 dunal systems, stretching from the northern foreshores of Paradise Point to the open point break of Rainbow Bay in the south. BeachCare directly facilitates dune care at five locations, Paradise Point, Runaway Bay, Mermaid Beach, Palm Beach and North Kirra Beach; supports three partnership sites with Surfrider Foundation Gold Coast Tweed Chapter at North Kirra Beach, Friends of Rainbow Bay at Rainbow Bay and Labrador Residence Action Group at Labrador foreshores; as well as two individual sites at Mermaid Beach and Palm Beach. Through the provision of BeachCare, dune care activities involve dune planting, weed removal, litter pick-ups, seed collection and propagation and photo point monitoring. All activities are recorded, for example, how many plants planted or the amount of weeds removed, with future actions outlined. Under the GCCC Dune Management Policy 15, vegetation management plans, as well as annual work plans are collaborated by BeachCare or with support from BeachCare to direct best management practices to achieve success – increasing the dunal health for a healthy beach. Where weeds were once majority on the dunes, they are now minority with a healthy succession of native dune plants thriving on all of our BeachCare sites.

### **Striving for sustainable coastal community groups**

From a coastal management perspective, providing technical advice and support for dune management can be streamlined by following management policies and best planning practices. On the other hand, empowering community members and groups to be part of the management plan is a different strategy and in many cases quite complex. There are many community engagement models within the literature, including group, adaptive and social engagement (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Klooster, 2002 and Mendes de Leon *et al.* 2002). The primary objective within each of these models is to empower community participation for community action or individual welfare; however each have their advantages and limitations (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Klooster, 2002 and Mendes de Leon *et al.* 2002). In the sense of community engagement in coastal management, an adaptive model allows movement within a program that can evolve amid the waves of change both within the community and the actual active coastal environment.

Throughout the development of the BeachCare program, an adaptive engagement model has been adopted. This has included promoting an increasingly creative approach when conceptualising community engagement initiatives, allowing room to move to overcome barriers and promote continual community participation in proactive coastal management. BeachCare's limited financial framework has at times constrained the development of resources, access to consumables and full program potential, however investing in and empowering non-financial resources (passion, local knowledge, community participation, etc.) has promoted program sustainability. For example, educating community members and identifying with on-ground success, has encouraged community action groups to establish their own BeachCare sites. BeachCare currently supports three partnership sites, where the community groups now facilitate dune care without the need of an on-site BeachCare facilitator. Further, this has promoted a local knowledge approach, as community members share their past beach stories, assist with the development of BeachCare and dune management planning. BeachCare is delivered by a passionate team and with the development within the coordination role and, more importantly the enthusiastic community interests, annual community participation and on-ground works have doubled consecutively. Therefore, the adaptive engagement model has increased coastal awareness and action within a highly urbanised city resulting in BeachCare's success.

### **Funding and Partnerships**

BeachCare is funded annually by GCCC, and is reaching program capacity; however valuable lessons have been learnt to overcome resource limitations to continually support community dune care. Through the adaptive engagement model, maintaining a diverse partnership network has successfully managed program capacity and created partnerships on the beaches. This has included close cooperative partnerships with GCCC, NRM bodies, including South East Queensland Catchments, as well as more local environmental and community-based umbrella identities, such as Gold Coast Catchment Association and Connecting Southern Gold Coast. Through each division, BeachCare has strategically positioned the caring word to promote coastal community engagement, further connecting the north to south dune corridor.

### **Marketing resources – getting the care out there!**

BeachCare has incorporated a 'diversified' approach to simply 'get the care out there'. BeachCare runs at program capacity and unfortunately, due to their associated costs, snazzy advertisements are a striving dream. However, utilising fresh ideas and passionate slogans with a community ownership feel, 'the beach is yours, save it with BeachCare' and 'care for your local beach with BeachCare', BeachCare has been branded with a caring nature. Through adopting such a diversified avenue by using community switchboards and online tool programs, as well as tagging onto environmental campaigns and having a prominent presence at community festivals, longevity of the program begins to surface.

Adapting to the eco-coast care movement of the Gold Coast has positioned BeachCare with many sites from Paradise Point to Rainbow Bay and where feasible BeachCare is 'on the news, in the news and is the news.' Identifying parties that can promote coast care, local stories have been told to share the history of Gold Coast's beach culture. From the northern foreshores to the iconic breaking points of the south, BeachCare is on the dunes, encouraging everyone to take action and be part of the change. Hence, increasing coastal awareness and sustaining social inclusion in coastal management.

### **Where are the volunteers?**

This all sounds like a recipe for success, however finding those hidden pearls: that key person, to take action can be the dilemma of many community development initiatives. The diversity behind volunteer's reasoning for participating can be overwhelming, and accommodating different people's needs can be challenging. On the other hand providing an active, engaging and accessible program that enables everyone to become engaged has assisted in managing volunteer participation. For example, providing the community with a no or limited commitment program, accessible site locality (including a number of sites all along the Gold Coast), low-physical needs, and regular dune care activities, almost every Saturday of the year allows people to come as often as they want. Community participation has doubled annually, and within the last year over 2000 community hours have been volunteered. This has been driven by a part-time program coordinator, which to some extent has overcome such hurdles of program momentum and the lifespan of community groups. For example, where community initiatives are solely-driven by volunteers, maintaining the program momentum and lifespan of the group can be limited by the commitment of key group members.

Furthermore, BeachCare engages with established community groups and the corporate sector to increase volunteer participation during community dune care activities. The collaboration of a resourceful database has efficiently targeted specific groups and more so promoted an 'action-packed program to the corporate world. Involving community groups has established long-term partnerships, such as the Tugun Girl Guides who have been involved in BeachCare for over three years. This has promoted individual coastal awareness and more so resonated coast care into the wider community. Holding close networks within the corporate division has also increased participation and on-ground works, as well as fundraising efforts. As BeachCare facilitates an adaptive financial management model, it is not-for-profit and encourages the charitable arrangement to receive donations and acquire sponsored partnerships. For example, in the last year, Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology, Land Care, Bunnings and Parson Brinckerhoff partnered with BeachCare for their community engagement day, donating funds/resources for program development. This has created less dependency on the annual financial support from GCCC, manages community capacity needs, and has created an "opportunistic orientation among recipients".

The other advantage of BeachCare is that the program provides an adaptive framework that requires minimal commitment and can be adapted to the needs of different BeachCare groups and sites. Alternatively where further commitment is needed the program is streamlined without a 'bureaucratic work culture.' For example, where volunteers or community groups volunteer on their own accord through the development of 'self-sufficient' dune care groups, streamlined reporting processes (tick the boxes and simple work record forms) reduces time on reporting, freeing more time for on-ground action. Additionally, where 'self-sufficient' dune care groups have concerns or need technical advice, BeachCare provides support and when necessary, forwards issues directly to the right person within the local Council. This further promotes the adaptive streamline approach ensuring minimal pressure is placed on available resources and provides the opportunity for all partners and participants to cooperatively achieve BeachCare goals.

Another initiative BeachCare has adopted to sustain volunteers is presenting a competitive streak on the dunes. Community members love to feel they are achieving results, and in a sense being part of the larger project of preserving and restoring the coastal environment. Fortunately on the dunes, results are visible over a short period of time. BeachCare utilises this within its marketing strategy to gain and maintain volunteers, further sustaining dune care. Through weekly notices, updated websites and colourful newsletters, BeachCare provides a concise update on the amazing efforts, especially elaborating on the history-making effort. In the sense of BeachCare's 'success', volunteers therefore feel a part of their local coastal environment, ultimately supporting the volunteered program.

Who are all these amazing volunteers and what value do they provide? This highlights the strategy BeachCare adopts to empower volunteers, keeping them on the dunes. During community dune care activities, one-on-one communication promotes a grounding and passionate program, as well as a non-bureaucratic work culture. People love to feel they are part of the team, which is why BeachCare incorporates people's values and visions into the program development and where applicable into the management plan. Therefore, this empowerment and shared knowledge directs the program towards long-term sustainability.

## **Results on the dunes**

Everyone loves the beach and where there is cooperative care weeds are now minority with native dune plants succeeding over the dunes. Following the adaptive engagement model has ensured results on the dunes and underlined the sustainable approach for coastal community engagement. As BeachCare strives to establish community dune care groups, in 2009 the Surfrider Foundation Gold Coast Tweed Chapter partnered with BeachCare to initiate the first partnership dune care site. Surfrider Foundation recognises the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the planet's coasts are necessary and irreplaceable and is committed to conserving natural living and non-living diversity and ecological integrity of the coastal environment (Surfrider Foundation, 2010). With such a focused mission, the dune care group was established to achieve and increase the integrity and conservation of North Kirra's dune environment.

Once the aim and partnership was outlined, dune management and training was facilitated by BeachCare. This included the provision of the vegetation management plan, annual work plan, initial training presentations and on-site guidance, as well as follow up action plans, minimal reporting and monitoring. Maintaining close guidance and providing program momentum has directed Surfrider Foundation towards on-

ground success. Surfers turned dune carers have promoted dune management within the surfing culture, branding the necessity of 'healthy dunes for healthy banks'.

Due to BeachCare's constraining access to resources, the group's on-ground equipment was initially funded by a SEQ Catchment's Community NRM grant of \$500. This has supplied all on-ground equipment needs, including shovels, buckets, hoses, watering cans, secateurs and plants. All other on-ground resources, such as consumables, have been provided in-kind by BeachCare, e.g. plants for special events, water crystals and fertiliser. Further, with a permit to collect native plant cuttings from the dunes at North Kirra, the group has successfully re-stored the dune via cuttings when funds cannot resource purchased plants. With achievable targets outlined, Surfrider Foundation plant a minimum of 30 native dune plants, and collect two diffuse bags of weeds and/or beach litter. During their recent community dune care activity, 25 community members volunteered, planting over 100 native dune plants, collecting 10 bags of weeds and eight bags of beach litter. There it is success with a cooperative approach towards sustainable coastal community groups.

This Surfrider and BeachCare partnership and development of a 'self-sufficient' dune care group provides an excellent example of an active group that requires minimal funding with notable results on the dunes. BeachCare plans to further develop such groups and are currently in negotiations with a local caravan park that have shown strong interest in developing a school holiday program.

## **Conclusion**

Effective coastal community engagement is an essential key component to achieve enthusiastic community participation in community dune care. BeachCare is an excellent example of how an adaptive engagement model strives for sustainable community involvement and creates partnership on the beaches. By providing a diversified and flexible framework, lessons have been learnt to overcome barriers and achieve sustainable social inclusion in coastal community groups – allowing everyone to take action and care for their local beach.

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