

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING, MEDIA AND INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO PROJECT DELIVERY – ENGAGING OUR YOUTH

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The Landcare movement is over 20 years old now. Many of the original members who have invested many hours of labour into restoration projects are now of an aged demographic not only in the Illawarra region but around the nation.

One issue repeatedly raised at Landcare and volunteer forums and conferences, is a concern that there is a lack of new recruitment into Landcare, and in particular a lack of youth recruitment into community driven Natural Resource Management (NRM) projects.

Vast amounts of time and funding have been invested in many long-term projects around the country, and the growing concern is that there will be no succession occurring so that these natural areas and projects will be maintained into the future.

Young people of generation Y are generally interested and concerned about environmental issues, but being time poor and over committed leaves little opportunity for this generation to contribute ongoing commitment to any specific projects. And with many environmental volunteer organisations, advocacy and campaign groups, there is an overwhelming amount of information and ways for young people to get involved in environment themed programs which may satisfy a desire to give back to the environment and contribute something to the community.

In the Southern Rivers Catchment, Community Support Officers (CSOs) are employed by Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (SRCMA) to support District Landcare Associations (DLAs) which act as the umbrella support network for the wider Landcare community in each sub-region.

Through supporting the DLAs, CSOs deliver a number of awareness raising activities, field days and training opportunities for community members to become involved in, and use a range of techniques to promote these opportunities and engage everyday people into Landcare activities.

In the Illawarra, the CSO is employed by Conservation Volunteers Australia and is funded by SRCMA to support Landcare Illawarra to carry out these activities and deliver outcomes which achieve increased community awareness, increased community participation and increased quality NRM projects being delivered by community volunteer groups and private landholders.

The Illawarra region is unique in that the CSO also has delivered a number of innovative approaches to engaging young people into NRM in a volunteer capacity, through the establishment of Illawarra Youth Landcare, which has been used as a tool to further raise the profile of Landcare in the region.

Raising the Landcare profile

With so many volunteer programs available today and a high demand for volunteers from these organisations, having a high profile within the local community is very important.

Landcare Australia Limited (LAL) is the organisation responsible for raising national awareness and maintaining sponsorship for projects which aim to protect the Australian environment. The not for profit organisation runs regular advertising campaigns on commercial television, in print media and through other online resources and social media which aim to raise general awareness about the movement and try to encourage wider involvement and support. But when young people are asked today in the general community, “do you know what Landcare is?” it is still evident that there is a lack of awareness amongst the general public about what Landcare is and what it aims to achieve.

Promoting projects and opportunities at a local level is essential if there is to be local involvement. When people are reminded that there are projects accessible to them and that once involved, they will be contributing something valuable back to the local environment, this can have positive flow on effects and will generally result in an increase of involvement and support.

This is a desirable outcome and demonstrates that having constant exposure and raising the profile of what Landcare is, and that it is highly active in a region, is important to promote in the general community.

Using mainstream media

Mainstream media such as radio, television and print is one of the most powerful tools for raising awareness in the wider community about Landcare efforts and opportunities for people to become involved in.

In the Illawarra all of these media types are used to promote programs being delivered and opportunities for people to become involved in. The CSO regularly promotes Landcare activities on local ABC radio, local television on local news programs such as WIN News, and sends out regular media releases to local papers to attract media attention and photo opportunities to promote events and activities such as workshops, environment days and field days.

Although mainstream media is probably the most effective tool for widely promoting Landcare activities, it does not always reach a young demographic. And this is why it is important to combine a range engagement techniques.

Using social media

In 2009, Megan Rowlett (Illawarra CSO) established Illawarra Youth Landcare group after recognising there was a desperate need to recruit young volunteers into Landcare activities in the Illawarra region. Young people were interested but groups were stressing that it was difficult to retain volunteers who were young on their site. Illawarra Youth Landcare was established as a Landcare group exclusively for young people to become involved in.

Illawarra Youth Landcare is a group of young volunteers ranging in age from late teens to early thirties. The group travels around and assists a different Landcare or Bushcare group on their site for a few hours one weekend a month.

After sending a media release to the local papers, putting a call out to young interested community members, the first Landcare project on the 14th of June 2009, attracted eighteen keen young volunteers who turned up on site in response to a newspaper article which featured in the Illawarra Mercury the previous week.

Shortly after, a Facebook page was established for Illawarra Youth Landcare.

Facebook is a free and efficient way to communicate with young people. It has proven the most interactive and effective tool for Illawarra Youth Landcare group, with over 150 people following the page to date.

Facebook is used to promote up and coming projects, share information about weeds and vegetation communities the group has worked in as well as post photos that volunteers can share and enjoy after they have participated in an activity. Volunteers are also able to better connect with each other via the Illawarra Youth Landcare Facebook page.

A sense of social inclusion is better captured and encouraged post projects, and many volunteers are now communicating and interacting well after projects have finished through Facebook.

Twitter has also been set up for the group and this helps to tap into the demographic of users who like to follow updates via this form of social media. Project events and links to pages displaying information about up and coming projects are posted to the Illawarra Youth Landcare account as well as photos from the field. These are often re-tweeted by followers which means that activity from Illawarra Youth Landcare is shared beyond those who are only following the group.

Landcare Illawarra also has a Facebook profile which has over 600 friends and is therefore a great awareness raising tool for the wider social media community. Flyers and links to workshops advertised on the Landcare Illawarra website, important information from government departments as well as photos from community days are shared and often re-shared via people who have subscribed to the Landcare Illawarra profile.

After the Landcare Illawarra profile was established in 2009, there was a significant increase in participation from previously unengaged people. People who had never been involved in Landcare or been aware of Landcare in the Illawarra were attending workshops and events because the information was reaching a wider audience and a wide variety of demographics.

Using websites

Not everyone is interested in or has a social media account, so this needs to be considered when developing an online presence.

Illawarra Youth Landcare as well as Landcare Illawarra both have websites which display general information about what the group is, how it works, how people can become involved and where they can go for more information.

Websites are a great portal to direct interested community members to find out more about how they can become involved or where to go for more information about local groups and projects.

Illawarra Youth Landcare was successful with a Community Action Grant from the federal government in 2010 which allowed them to develop a website (www.illawarrayouthlandcare.com.au) with a local web design company to produce a site which is unique to the group. The website has a fresh, fun and dynamic interface which aims to attract a younger demographic. As part of the grant, the group has developed some online educational resources for volunteers who are new to bush regeneration to view as an introduction to what they will be doing as volunteers. This included some weed removal technique videos which were developed and delivered by the volunteers of Illawarra Youth Landcare. The videos are embedded on the website for any interested community member to view. They are permanently uploaded to a YouTube account and anyone can view them.

To date some of the videos have been shared on the TAFE NSW website and shared with students studying conservation and land management.

Using YouTube

Both Landcare Illawarra and Illawarra Youth Landcare have YouTube channels where educational and story-telling videos have been uploaded.

YouTube is a great way to store your online video resources. Creating a channel is free and you can embed these videos into any website. Links to YouTube videos can be shared via Facebook and Twitter and so are easily promoted to the online community.

Landcare Illawarra produced a number of digital stories which followed the journey of a number of award recipients as part of their regional 'Champions of the Catchment' Awards program. Five videos were uploaded onto the Landcare Illawarra YouTube channel, then embedded into a page on the Landcare Illawarra website and also shared via Facebook. The stories have collectively attracted over 590 views to date.

Illawarra Youth Landcare also has a YouTube channel which is used to host four demonstration videos on weed removal techniques. These are for volunteers who are new to bush regeneration and aim to raise awareness about the importance of weed management. The group has also produced a short video which captures the journey of activities the group has been involved in in the past, featuring backing music, footage and photos of the volunteers at work and play. This is used as an advertising tool to attract further youth involvement. The videos have collectively attracted over 580 views to date.

The power of story telling

Sharing knowledge, skills, achievements and failures is one of the most powerful tools for not only engaging new volunteers but also helping to motivate and assist with encouraging existing volunteer groups. We are better connected than we have ever been before and our ability to share information is easier than ever before. Utilising all of the above outlets, we can tell our stories and encourage and inspire others to become involved.

Many groups are using video editing and Place Story software to develop short stories about local projects. This is a great way to capture volunteer efforts and share and inspire others in their own efforts. Landcare groups are using social media more and more and it is becoming easier to connect with groups and individuals from around the country and hear about different techniques for dealing with environmental issues, ways of engaging people, ways of

delivering workshops and training and also creating a sense of community beyond a local town or city.

Innovative approaches to delivering projects

Illawarra Youth Landcare model

Illawarra Youth Landcare is a group of young volunteers ranging in age from late teens to early thirties. The group travels around and assists a different Landcare or Bushcare group on their site for a few hours one weekend day a month. Illawarra Youth Landcare volunteers are able to learn new techniques and hear about environmental issues the region is facing, and carry out activities to assist with the management of these environmental issues on a range of sites across the Illawarra. Group members are able to socialise and see natural areas in the region that they may not normally get to visit, and also benefit from working alongside experienced and knowledgeable volunteers of an older generation. Each Landcare project ends with a social activity the volunteers can join in, these activities range from games of football or cricket on the beach to a BBQ and a swim. This gives volunteers an opportunity to have some fun and socialise with other volunteers beyond carrying out Landcare activities.

Partnerships have been developed with organisations and other Landcare groups beyond the Illawarra region such as NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), SRCMA, *The Crossing* – sustainability education centre, and Willow Warriors to provide unique overnight expeditions to areas outside the Illawarra.

These overnight expeditions expose volunteers to environmental issues beyond the Illawarra and allow for volunteers to network with agency staff and other volunteers and experienced bush regenerators who have extensive NRM experience.

Such projects also provide a valuable opportunity for volunteers to bond as they are spending up to 48 hours together over a weekend. Overnight expeditions also include an outdoor adventure activity. This may be kayaking or white water rafting, caving, bush walking or swimming. This gives volunteers an opportunity to actually appreciate and enjoy the natural areas they are working to protect through the conservation activities they also take part in over the duration of the weekend.

Case study 1: City meets Country Landcare – Bermagui Koala Project – September 2012

Illawarra Youth Landcare travelled to the far south coast of NSW to stay at sustainability education centre *The Crossing* in Bermagui. Here volunteers connected with private landholders, catchment management authority staff, environmental educators, and NPWS staff to learn about biodiversity and conservation programs around Koala habitat protection on the far south coast.

Volunteers also learnt about sustainable design and systems around the home by staying at *The Crossing*. Volunteers participated in construction of pathways, learnt about bushfire management on the property and assisted with fire wood collection as well as garden bed construction and composting practices.

Volunteers carried out a Koala habitat planting project on a private property which contributed to creating ideal habitat for the future of this endangered community of Koalas. Through this activity, the volunteers were able to learn about how farmers and private landholders are contributing to biodiversity projects and protecting the environment.

The tree plantings will connect two major National Parks which is important for the survival of Koalas and other native wildlife. Volunteers also assisted NPWS to collect data for one of the most important Koala habitat surveys in Australia.

Kayaking and bush walking around the local properties as well as music around the camp fire were just some of the social and outdoor adventure activities the volunteers experienced as part of this trip as well.

Majority of the participants had never participated in a Landcare activity before and a number of these volunteers have since attended more recent Illawarra Youth Landcare projects and made friendships with other volunteers who have become part of the group.

Feedback from some of the volunteers after the project included:

“That was one of the most valuable and rewarding projects I have contributed to in years”

“I now appreciate the value of habitat connectivity, have an inspiration to live more sustainably, and a new passion for environmental education”

“I am studying Mining and Environmental engineering, something many see as opposing dichotomy but this event reinforced my passion for the environment and I am keen to continue to volunteer and experience more activities hosted by Landcare to learn more and also be able to contribute to intelligent conversation about mining industry and the necessary changes that need to evolve and that I hope to be a part of in the future”

Case Study 2: Landcare for Singles

The inaugural Landcare for Singles speed planting events were run by the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges Landcare Network in Victoria in 2011 to address recruitment issues for Landcare groups in the area. The Network ran two hugely successful planting days, which attracted over 100 participants, 95% of whom were completely new to Landcare. An after-party was also hosted, giving the opportunity for all singles from both planting events to come together and mingle.

In 2012 Landcare Australia launched the program around the nation and supported each state to host a Landcare for Singles event to attract new volunteers to the Landcare movement.

In partnership with SRCMA, Landcare Illawarra and Conservation Volunteers Australia, Illawarra Youth Landcare delivered a Landcare for Singles event for the state of NSW.

The event was delivered on a local dairy farm and contributed to erosion control and biodiversity corridor outcomes for the Rose Valley catchment in Gerringong, NSW.

Trees were planted along the creek line and participants were able to mingle by planting as partners in a speed dating fashion where they answered a series of questions which were attached to each plant.

65% of the 37 participants who attended the tree planting event had never participated in a Landcare event previously, and participants ranged in age from 23 up to 69 years. Majority of volunteers said they would attend a similar event and become involved in another Landcare activity in the future. To date, two participants have joined Illawarra Youth Landcare on a number of recent projects.

Recommendations

Using a range of resources and techniques is the key to raising awareness and attracting a range of demographics into volunteer activities.

Using innovative and fresh approaches to community engagement will assist with attracting interest from community members who have previously not been involved.

In the case of the Illawarra, it has been affective to provide opportunities which are just as much about the social interactions as well as the biodiversity outcomes. By being creative and learning about systems and models which are working in other regions, we can adapt our approaches and techniques in community engagement to suit the needs, wants and desires of the wider community.

For the longevity of projects and volunteer involvement in movements such as Landcare, it is important to cater to a dynamic environment of what the community expects out of their experiences. In the case of Illawarra Youth Landcare, volunteers are attracted to the group because there is no ongoing obligation to commit to the group long term. It may be that these volunteers may not volunteer for many years after one or two encounters, but later in life when they can afford to donate more time to a cause they may be more inclined to return to Landcare activities due to the positive experiences they had in earlier years, or return to a particular site they may have developed a connection with.

Volunteer needs are always changing and the Landcare movement needs to evolve with this in mind. Providing creative, fun and interesting projects which provide social opportunities as well as result in quality environmental outcomes is a method we are seeing prove effective not only in the Illawarra but in other regions as well.

By sharing stories, ideas and developing strong communication networks amongst the NRM community as well as the wider community, we can continue to learn from a wider network of groups and individuals carrying out projects across the region and across the country. By utilising free resources such as social media and other online resources, we can continue to connect and provide quality experiences for volunteers which result in positive outcomes for the environment.