

Gippsland Lakes: A Case Study in Custodianship

Introduction

We have a story about an idea. An experiment. A model of natural resource management that is a blend of the 'tried and true' and the new and untested.

The idea is underpinned by the belief that people look after what they value.

The idea is that with the right people, purpose and passion, the health of an important regional asset can be well-managed and improved.

The existence of the organisation for which we work arises from a desire to protect the Gippsland Lakes for the future.

Our organisation was established by Ministerial direction and we report to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change and the Minister for Regional and Rural Development.

It came about because our regional community, through its political leaders, felt strongly enough about protecting the Gippsland Lakes, to demand a different model of decision-making and resource allocation.

The model has two key strengths. Firstly, it explicitly recognises the community's expectation to be involved in decisions that affect the environment in which they live by much more strongly involving the local community in the management of their environment.

And secondly, (primarily because of this first strength) the model is explicit and purposeful in recognising that the future of this natural asset is most effectively delivered by addressing the protection and enhancement of the environmental, social and economic values of the Gippsland Lakes.

Our mission is supported by a clear government commitment, access to funding and local knowledge, and a community with an increasing sense of ownership. Our story is about building strong and inclusive custodianship for the future.

The Gippsland Lakes

The Gippsland Lakes is an iconic Ramsar listed coastal wetland system covering over 600 square kilometres in eastern Victoria.

The largest navigable lakes system in Australia, the Gippsland Lakes support diverse ecological values and host several residential communities, a thriving tourism sector, recreational and commercial fisheries, and boating activities.

The protection and care of the natural values of the Lakes is critical to the future of international migratory birds, as well as diverse resident populations of native flora and fauna, including a recently declared unique species of dolphin – the Burrunan dolphin.

These natural values also support considerable economic and social capital.

The intrinsic natural values of the Lakes inspire and motivate scientific endeavour, cultural connection, community commitment and a profound concern for their protection.

Who are we?

The Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee (GLMAC) consists of local people with backgrounds in natural resource management, business, tourism, fishing, planning, and public sector governance, all of whom live and/or work in the Gippsland Lakes region.

Committee members have networks extending throughout the region in all walks of life.

The executive consists of two full-time staff, one with planning qualifications and a background in local government and media and the other with a science degree and a background in natural resource management.

We are a very small entity with a very large responsibility.

What do we do?

GLMAC was established by the Victorian Government in 2012 to provide advice to government on management of the health of the Gippsland Lakes and on allocation of the \$10 million Gippsland Lakes Environment Fund.

As we don't have statutory responsibility assigned by legislation, we don't utilise the stick of authority. We use the carrot of funding to implement actions through the establishment of partnerships with common goals

One of our greatest challenges, and possibly our strengths, is that we do not act or report according to the normal departmental processes. We tend to operate in a different world that relies on networks, not hierarchies, and we can only succeed if we work across government, the private sector and the community and demonstrate value and accountability to each.

The Committee's terms of reference also provide a strong mandate to undertake community education. We carry out this role with passion and a belief that long-term change only comes about through winning the hearts and minds of the community and providing information and inspiration for people to embrace their own future and that of their natural environment.

What have we done?

It might seem that a temporary body with just two staff, whose role is primarily to provide advice, wouldn't have much influence within the decision-making processes of government and wouldn't get much done.

It helps that the advice we provide is on strategy and funding and our advice has been almost unequivocally accepted by our Ministers. We developed an environmental strategy in a kind of speed-dating exercise with our partners and stakeholders! We had three months to prepare it and three years to deliver it.

We took a very broad view of the “environment” of the Gippsland Lakes, to include the economic prosperity and social connection that are generated by the natural values of the Lakes and catchment.

We advised our Ministers that the three pillars of sustainability should be addressed through a funding program: to manage and protect environmental values, build social capital and enhance economic opportunity.

These values are explicitly acknowledged in the listing of the Lakes under the Ramsar convention, which refers to the commercial fishery, the use of the Lakes for recreation and tourism and the existence of surrounding communities who value the asset beyond its intrinsic environmental qualities.

How do we do it?

Our approach aims to treat a healthy Lakes’ environment, community and economy as part of a single set of challenges and opportunities.

The key is that we provide advice on programs that sit inside, outside and across existing departmental roles.

We have initiated and fostered new partnerships and collaborations across research and monitoring, land and water management, on-ground environmental restoration and community education.

As we had to conceive, scope and design projects with our partners, we went into these partnerships with a clear understanding, through a strategy endorsed by the Committee and Ministers, of what we needed to achieve.

In the planning and coordination sphere, we found issues that were causing concern to individual stakeholders, but required resolution by several.

In operational areas (i.e. on-ground activities), we are able to extend or enhance the core activities of agencies and volunteer groups by identifying what works and who does it best.

In the case of research and monitoring, we were able to find the experts and engage them in a discussion about the knowledge gaps. Algal blooms, fish stock monitoring, invasive pests, foreshore erosion, changes in fringing vegetation – these are the issues that we set out to investigate and increase collective knowledge.

We set ten big audacious goals, within six themes underpinned by areas for focus and another one hundred actions. The themes we used were:

1. Biodiversity and Natural Values
2. Regional Economy
3. Social and Cultural Connection
4. Catchment and Ecosystem Dynamics
5. Community Knowledge and Engagement
6. Governance

What we know; what we don't know!

The 'known knowns' for us include many activities in the more traditional areas of natural resource management. Activities that reduce nutrients entering the lakes from the catchment, restore ecological linkages, and enhance the important fringing wetlands. The difference was that we were insistent that community engagement and information-sharing was central to the projects.

Funding was allocated to a range of programs delivered by catchment management authorities, Landcare groups, Department of Environment and Primary Industries, and a superb program of wetland restoration delivered by Greening Australia, that has brought together traditional owners, birdwatchers, schools and landowners.

The 'known unknowns' were detailed in the Strategy as knowledge gaps. They included information about the populations of important bird and fish species, seagrass condition, the scale and extent of threats posed by pest plants and animals, the relationships between water quality, nutrients, seagrass and fish habitat and the processes occurring throughout history in the dynamics and always changing environment of the Lakes.

Our model allowed us to put ourselves out there as a body seeking to fund projects addressing a succinct list of current priority knowledge gaps. Many of these gaps are being addressed through the Monitoring and Research Program by researchers with a long history of working in and around the Lakes.

We also forged partnerships with newcomers to the stage such as the Australian Marine Mammal Conservation Foundation, who have recently lead the identification and listing of a new and threatened dolphin species resident in the Lakes – the Burrunan dolphin.

The 'unknown unknowns' – we don't know what they are!

We are open to the suggestion that we don't know everything and that we may have missed something that was completely off the radar. Our program may have failed in some areas to address the issue that needed attention. There may be environmental threats, community aspirations, research needs that we could only discover by exploring and asking the right questions.

We will undertake a comprehensive review before the end of our tenure to identify the things that we didn't know, including emerging issues identified by our stakeholders, partners, and uncovered by the work we are now undertaking.

The strength of the model, involving a broad range of stakeholders and exploring new territory is that we it is more likely to unearth the previously unknown unknowns, at least to turn them into 'known unknowns'.

In a recent review, we found that we had ostensibly achieved, or were on the way to achieving, 91 of our 100 identified actions. That difficult 9% has told us a lot about what we don't know.

Engagement

A singular aspect of what we regard as success in the delivery of our program is to engage.

We hold a firm belief that the future of environmental custodianship is in public engagement, education and participation. Thanks to our mandate to undertake “community education”, we have not only built a strong engagement theme into all of the projects we initiated, but we undertake engagement ‘for its own sake’.

Our philosophy is that real change and real increase in capacity to manage our local environment can only come from community involvement, sharing of knowledge and, where possible, by empowering the community, interest groups and individuals to take and active interest in their own affairs.

The Gippsland Lakes is such a fascinating place; yet, much of the scientific information about the Lakes was stored in the knowledge bases of government agencies, researchers and interest groups, not necessarily shared for greater collective wisdom.

We have a spectacularly innocent view that information is power and the more information that people have, the more powerful they will be to take responsibility for their own future. We are not afraid of harnessing or creating expertise in others.

We have invested a time and energy into new tools, new processes, contemporary media, on-line participation and school-based education and, in doing so, have exposed ourselves to criticism. One of the great risks in community engagement is that you encourage people to express their views, expose their biases, and sometimes be openly critical of what you do. In the world of legitimate engagement, this is acceptable, and, in fact, desirable.

Our target audience is everyone. Our stakeholder map looks like the white pages – government agencies, politicians, farmers, householders, scientists, self-proclaimed environmental experts, local government, tourists, recreational anglers, commercial fishermen, hunters, volunteers, schoolchildren... it goes on and on.

But our commitment to genuine engagement has meant that we are not afraid to open up debates about environmental threats, the so-called “collapse” of the fishery, the threat of salinity, (a consequence of establishing a permanent entrance to the sea in 1889) and all manner of other perceived and real challenges that we face in protecting the future health of the Lakes.

Through our overlapping and sometimes disparate networks in the worlds of natural resource management, climate change, local government planning, research, tourism, fishing and the media, we have inspired information-sharing and engaged in debate that is sometimes painfully misinformed and, at others, beautifully concise and accurate.

Through an active media campaign, a strong on-line presence and a Facebook page that is, in the words of one of our detractors “cheery and optimistic” we have engaged thousands of people in a discussion that is vitally important – are the Lakes healthy, or not? Are we doing enough to protect them, or not? Why should we protect them? What can we do now?

In some cases, there was some hesitance to support some of our engagement strategies and objectives; for example, to “support social and recreational activity that depends on a healthy lakes environment”, and to “promote cultural connection” to the Lakes.

The key to obtaining support was to come back to our fundamental premise; that people will be more likely to act to protect the things that they value. It also enabled us to latch onto the normal day to day activities of our community and make the connection back to a healthy natural environment. In many ways this reflects one of the key attributes of good engagement – go where the people are, don't expect them to come to you. Physically and emotionally, our stakeholders are out there enjoying the Lakes and our message is: "the Gippsland Lakes are precious; together we can protect them for the future".

The Future

Management of a complex and changing environmental system can transcend the functional roles of agencies, diverse community interests, and traditional models of governance by applying creativity, passion and calculated risk-taking.

In this complexity, where many agency and community interests intersect, a coordination model has emerged that has successfully identified and pursued environmental, economic and community outcomes through a single theme: Love Our Lakes.

Innovative partnerships across government, the private sector, community and educational institutions can continue to grow and develop by adopting a broad view of custodial responsibility and an ethos of creative engagement.

Conclusion

Through involvement of a broad cross-section of the community, explicit and purposeful recognition of the environmental, social and economic values of the Gippsland Lakes, innovative partnerships, and a strong focus on engagement, the implementation of the Gippsland Lakes Environmental Strategy has created a strong platform for community custodianship and confidence in the future.

Our Learnings

1. Seeking and accepting diverse views guarantees robust coverage of the issues.
2. Money is useful, especially when focussed towards agreed priorities.
3. The integrity of the vision is better maintained where there is common involvement in the planning and the delivery.
4. It's good to take calculated risks.
5. People networks and system networks are crucial.