



# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

A CELEBRATION OF LANDCARE





# CARING FOR OUR COUNTRY

Publisher: Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry,  
Canberra ACT 2008

ISBN: 978-0-9803714-2-0

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Editors: Allan Sharp and Jesse Blackadder  
Designer: [www.WhiteFox.com.au](http://www.WhiteFox.com.au)  
Printer: Paragon Printers, Fyshwick, ACT, 2609

Photographs: pp. cover, vi, 1, 2, 12, 46, 58, 102, 116, 149,  
176: Arthur Mostead Photography

Cover Picture: Farmers Ian and Fiona Horsley on their property 'Gundillawah' near Adelong NSW.



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## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the members of the Australian Landcare Council (ALC) Steering Committee—John Klem and Ian Sauer (co-chairs), Bobbie Brazil, Alex Arbuthnot (National Farmers Federation representative), Donna Moodie (Indigenous community member), Coral Love (National Landcare Facilitator) and Jim Forwood (Northern Territory community member)—who initiated this project and provided valuable advice and support. Their work was greatly assisted by Dr Pippa Carron from the ALC Secretariat.

Special thanks also to Jesse Blackadder for her considerable work and patience in compiling, writing and editing many of the contributions.

The book would not have been possible without the support and enthusiasm of the very many landcare groups that contributed articles and information. Regrettably, space did not permit the publication of all contributions received. In making our selection, we have tried to draw on a representative cross-section of programs across Australia.

# MINISTER'S FOREWORD

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Two decades ago Australia was facing grave environmental challenges. We still face those same challenges, but thanks to the commitment of tens of thousands of volunteers we're making significant progress in natural resource conservation. Twenty years of formal landcare effort are changing the face of Australia.

As newcomers to an ancient land, European settlers made mistakes through unsuitable farming practices and misunderstanding of the land's fragile ecology.

In the past 20 years, however, our attitudes towards, and our understanding of, our natural environment have changed a great deal. In spite of the past seven years of drought in most regions, and longer in others, devastating dust storms have recurred, but not to the same extent as we saw in the early 1980s. This is testament to the affinity our farmers have with their land and to their delivery of integrated landscape management, which is paying its way and building resilience into our resources.

We've learned much, and many other countries are keen to follow our example. Little by little, and region by region, our farmers and communities are working together and proving that sustainable farming practices can increase productivity and support biodiversity.

One of the greatest outcomes of the past two decades is recognition of the value and strength in landcare partnerships between government, the corporate sector, communities and individuals. Most importantly, the landcare model has shown that communities and individuals can achieve remarkable results when given the power and the opportunity to identify problems and implement their own solutions.

The original caretakers of this land—the Aboriginal peoples—have much to teach us, and the section in this book on Indigenous landcare shows how traditional practices in landcare management remain appropriate to today's Australia.



Our nation relies on our agricultural industries for food security and export revenue. As we now confront climate change and globalisation—perhaps the greatest challenges of all—the past successes of the landcare movement and knowledge gained by land managers, allow us to be optimistic that further changes to management systems will minimise the effects on our frangible resources.

This book is a tribute to the thousands of individuals and communities who have played a part in the Australian landcare movement over the past 20 years and who remain committed to its principles.

Congratulations on your successes, and thank you for making a difference to our nation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Burke". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Tony Burke**  
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries  
and Forestry

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# CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

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The Australian Landcare Council is proud to have initiated this book to celebrate 20 years of landcare achievement. We also see the publication as providing examples and inspiration for meeting the challenges ahead.

As the Australian Government's key natural resource management advisory body, the council relies heavily on its 'on-ground' volunteers to ensure a necessary reality check and knowledge base so that relevant ministers and their departmental officials can have confidence in its advice.

The council has been especially effective in linking landcarers and land managers with important government initiatives and policies. This was very evident at our February 2008 meeting and forum on Climate Change and Emissions Trading. A number of key messages were identified at that forum, particularly on the assistance that landcare could provide as a vehicle to engage, inform and educate land managers, and ensure that consultation was explicit, open, meaningful and inclusive.

The council has provided advice on a diverse range of contemporary issues, including drought, water and native vegetation management, climate change and biofuels, and has noted the impact of the widespread drought on rural communities and landcare programs.

All of this suggests that the role of landcare—at the national, regional, local and, increasingly, international levels—will continue to be vital in dealing with the ever-mounting environmental and global challenges we face.



On behalf of the council, I congratulate the thousands of landcare groups around the country for their commitment and hard work, and warmly thank all those who have contributed to this book.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bobbie Brazil'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Bobbie Brazil**  
Chairman—Australian Landcare Council

THE LANDCARE PARTNERS  
INCLUDE NOT ONLY INDIVIDUALS  
BUT ANYONE INTERESTED IN  
BETTER NATURAL RESOURCE  
MANAGEMENT.



# INTRODUCTION

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## The power of partnerships *By Charles Willcocks\**

**If there is any one defining feature of landcare, it is partnerships. They have been the movement's strength and the key to its success.**

The landcare partners include not only individuals—particularly farmers and landowners—but anyone interested in better natural resource management. They include community groups, and industry and business, as well as federal, state and local governments.

Partnership brings with it two basic ideas—joint decision making and equal or shared contributions of resources and effort by the parties. This has worked well for landcare.

Government contributions, generally, have been in the form of funding, expert advice and assistance and administrative support. Federal governments have provided at least \$1 billion to the National Landcare Program (NLP), and state and territory governments have probably contributed an equivalent amount in cash or in kind.

But the major contributor to the landcare partnership has been the community itself. Estimates vary, but for every dollar contributed by governments the community has contributed almost double in value.

This not only represents an excellent return on the public funds invested in landcare but also recognises the public and private benefits from improved natural resource management.

The shift away from a 'top-down' to a 'bottom-up' approach in setting priorities and making decisions reflects a more subtle aspect of government support for landcare. This gives the community a greater say in what is important and what needs to be done—and how it might be done. Government departments can then lend their guidance and expertise.

Community ownership of landcare problems—and then empowering the community to plan and effect its own solutions—was and remains a powerful driver of the movement, though it took many in government departments time to understand this.





Wind-blown wheat crop near Culleraine, Vic.

It's not easy to hand over control, and it's a credit to successive governments and their agencies that they were willing to accept the risk.

The psychology was sound—communities were likely to value highly something they had planned and put into effect themselves, including making the difficult decisions about the trade-offs between use and conservation.

The bottom-up approach laid the groundwork for the larger-scale community-based regional and state project assessment panels of the 1990s and the regional and catchment management authorities of today.

Landcare's evolution corresponded with an increasing willingness of government to design programs that addressed the causes of natural resource degradation rather than the effects. Physical damage—a washed-out gully—was the symptom of a problem, the causes of which lay in factors that influenced farmers' decisions. These might include lack of knowledge or understanding, limited finances, attitude to risk or lack of skills.

A better longer-term solution was to focus on reducing or removing these impediments and to improving overall management skills.

The NLP is the best-known Commonwealth landcare-support program and has been administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and its predecessors since 1991—the beginning of what was known as the Decade of Landcare. Before then, the National Soil Conservation Program provided support for landcare.

The Commonwealth managed the program, in conjunction with the states and territories, through strategies known as Decade of Landcare Plans, and through partnership agreements.

The program was directed mainly at farmers and rural landcare groups, because it was recognised they managed most of the nation's land and water resources—though this was never a strict requirement.

In the early 1990s, the delivery of the NLP was combined with other environmental programs such as One Billion Trees, Save the Bush, and the Murray–Darling natural resource management (NRM) programs.

Government support for landcare and related NRM activities continued to grow, and became more complex with the advent of the Natural Heritage Trust in 1996 and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, endorsed by the Australian, state and territory governments in 2000—now part of the Caring for our Country initiatives.



## FROM THE START, THE LANDCARE MOVEMENT HAD AN IMPETUS OF ITS OWN.

The NLP has been a constant for more than 18 years. This is a long time for a government program and reflects the value governments place, and will continue to place, on community self-help and voluntary efforts.

The NLP formed a key part of a landcare ‘package of measures that included legislation, the Australian Landcare Council, the National Landcare Facilitator, support for community and corporate engagement through Landcare Australia, NRM research and development through Land and Water Australia, and landcare-related tax incentives for land managers.

Overall, the landcare approach was risky for governments—and outcomes in the form of improved management, engagement in landcare and improved resource condition were difficult to measure.

Has it been successful? Regular reviews and surveys indicate that our awareness of natural resource issues and our knowledge and capacity to deal with them are way ahead of where they were 20 years ago.

From the start, the landcare movement had an impetus of its own, and interest in the movement and the number of landcare groups that formed far exceeded the expectations of those who framed the early support programs.

Landcare, undoubtedly, initiated significant change in the design and delivery of government programs.

*Charles Willcocks is a former Manager of the National Landcare Program with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in Canberra.*