

# A Voice for Landcarers in NSW

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Presentation to the National Landcare Conference

18 September 2014

## Introduction

My name is Rob Dulhunty. I am a grazier and landcarer from the New England region of NSW. My involvement with landcare started 25 years ago. I've practised landcare on my own property...I've volunteered in my local landcare group and held leadership roles in networks. I was a founding member of Landcare NSW in 2007 and I've been chair of that organisation since 2011.

My presentation today is part of the landcare story in NSW. It's the story of how a group of landcarers got together and agreed that while we were many hands, we needed a single voice. The only way we could press our case for recognition, funding, awareness and bipartisan support was through a strong, united voice. I'm going to tell you this story in three parts:

1. How our organisation has evolved into a truly representative body for landcare in NSW
2. How we are driven every day by the needs and issues of our members: grassroots landcarers
3. Where we are now and our goals for the future.

Landcare NSW is very proud to be represented at this conference. In explaining what we have done in NSW, I acknowledge that landcarers in other jurisdictions are on a similar path. All states and territories have either set up a representative group or they're well on the way to establishing one.

We may be at different stages of development, there may be differences in the way landcare operates in each jurisdiction, and with different approaches by government, however there is no question that these organisations are providing a strong and growing voice for the community landcare movement.

### **1. How our organisation has evolved into a truly representative body for landcare**

Many people here today have been around landcare a long time...you know the history, the exponential rise in the number of groups, the levels of support we received under the Decade of Landcare Plan, and the integral role the local community owned coordinators played in supporting our volunteer movement. You would have observed how that support has declined over the years to the point where some groups now are struggling to survive.

The story of Landcare NSW begins seven years ago. Landcarers were fed up and frustrated. Many felt disenfranchised by the process of regionalisation and the reduction of support for Landcare at the State level. The hard work and investment of the previous decade to build a strong, flourishing landcare movement seemed to be falling away.

At that time we looked to Landcare Australia Limited to lead the charge. They said advocacy and representation were outside their remit, however they agreed with the need for change and encouraged the movement to organise, providing the funds for landcarers from across the state to gather.

This first meeting took place in June 2007 at a place called Myuna Bay, near Lake Macquarie, north of Sydney. The Myuna Bay meeting was the first step in the formation of Landcare NSW as the representative group for landcarers in NSW. At this meeting the key outcomes were the recognition that Landcare was strong and growing, that we needed to work on our partnerships and relationships, and that we needed to evolve our structure at the State level.

Following Myuna Bay, a muster of grassroots landcarers occurred in Tamworth 2007, where Landcare NSW was formed. By the second muster in Queanbeyan in 2008 we had our terms of reference and structure.

Landcare Australia Limited funded these initial meetings and then provided a further \$20,000 to get the organisation started. This paid for representatives from around the State to come to Sydney for meetings four times a year. They also gave us use of the board room and attended our meetings. I acknowledge their valued support in these formative years.

Since then we have grown into a statewide organisation that has stayed true to its original purpose – to provide a voice for landcarers in NSW. There are nearly 60,000 landcarers in NSW. We provide them with a representative organisation to support their work and represent their views to government and other stakeholders.

Landcare NSW has a Council of 21 volunteer members who come from around the State and there is provision to co-opt members based on their expertise. Each region decides who will represent them on the Council and how they will select their representatives. We do not dictate that, we leave it up to them.

The Council meets four times a year. Councillors bring views from the community and take information back to the community. There is an executive committee of eight, drawn from the Council and they have the backing of a small but dedicated group of mainly part time staff.

## **2. How we are driven every day by the needs and issues of our members: grassroots landcarers**

From the outset our organisation has been driven by the needs of our members. At our muster we ask our members for information on what is happening in their region. We ask them about local issues: what's working...what's not working...and what they want us to do as their representative organisation.

We have held musters in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, and 2013. We have listened to the messages from these and have delivered upon our members needs. For example...

### ***Members asked for help to run effective local groups.***

They wanted help with administrative, technical, and governance issues. So in 2012 we worked to secure funding from the State Government's Landcare Support Program to develop and deliver a suite of resources including workshops, factsheets and checklists.

### ***Members wanted better communication with the broader community, with each other and with government.***

They wanted to tell the story of landcare – to highlight and celebrate the achievements of groups in order to attract community interest, volunteers and support. So with funding from the NSW Government's Landcare Support program we developed and delivered a Snapshot of Landcare activity and a series of case studies so as to share good ideas among groups.

They wanted their voices to be heard by governments. We provided that by participating on committees and making submissions on a range of issues.

Members told us their interactions with NRM bodies was inconsistent. Some groups were being sidelined and excluded from planning, decision making and access to resources. We worked with Government to influence the changes that were occurring with the structure of NRM regional bodies, now known as Local Land Services (LLS), in NSW. We advised Government on the legislation and charter of the new

organisations. We now sit on a steering committee of landcare and LLS with the aim of together building a constructive partnership, which influences how collaboration is occurring at the regional level.

***Members raised the need for resources – an issue that has arisen at each and every muster.***

They had projects ready to go, new ideas to develop and previous work to maintain...but funding sources were drying up. In 2011 we lobbied all sides of government for the re-instatement of a statewide Landcare Support Program. This was successful with the NSW Government announcing a \$2 million commitment over 4 years.

In 2013 when the State Government announced its intention to withdraw \$65 million from the NRM budget we fought to save those funds so regional bodies and landcarers could be resourced to carry out works. We were the only organisation speaking out on the issue, and we won that debate. The funding was restored.

Over a number of years we have been thinking about how to broaden the funding base for landcare. This led to a partnership with Pozible – a digital crowdfunding organisation – and we are now on the brink of a very exciting new chapter in landcare funding.

### **3. Where we are now and our goals for the future**

I'm very proud of what we have achieved so far. We were a bunch of volunteers who saw a need for landcarers to have a voice. We built an organisation drawing on that same spirit that has seen thousands of landcare, bushcare, coastcare and other groups form all over Australia over the past 25 years. We've influenced policy, worked with government, provided groups with support, information, services and networking.

I think what we have achieved is especially significant given we are only seven years old.

Today I would like to publicly recognise and thank the 21 members who make up the Council of Landcare NSW. They are an extraordinary bunch of people ... people who have day jobs, businesses to run, farms, families and local landcare work...yet make time to attend meetings and support the work of the state organisation.

At times our journey has been challenging, but we have learnt the importance of sharing the workload and staying focused on our core purpose and key functions. We've learnt the value and importance of the musters in guiding our operations, and not being afraid of making changes to better serve our purpose and our members. We are still a work in progress but we are confident about the future.

Over the past 25 years landcare has been hugely influential. It's changed the way we think and the way we work. The need for landcare is as strong as ever – and so is the need to sustain the landcare movement.

There is a reservoir of trust and goodwill in landcare but with the emergence of so many different organisations at the state, territory and national level, we need to carefully consider how we work together and coordinate our efforts.

What's clear to me is that the voice for landcare must be representative – both at the state level and nationally. There is a need for national unity and clear messages to the general community.

At Landcare NSW we will continue to work hand in hand with our colleagues from around Australia to present the case for landcare and to allow our movement to flourish and grow into the future.

*Thank you.*