



# EXTENSION NET

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## Who is the “community”?

### Community profiling in the Brucknell Creek Catchment Project.

Story by **Josette O'Donnell**

*Community capacity building officer*

Like so many other projects, a group of active and interested stakeholders sit around the table in a small country town hall. They come from a host of organisations and they come from the “community” – state government departments, the dairy industry, Catchment Management Authorities, the EPA Victoria. Our organisations have a mandate to protect and care for the natural environment, our rural communities and industries. To carry this double edged sword we know we need to work with “the community” – but who are they?

The Brucknell Creek Catchment area – as one drives through – looks like a beautiful dairy farming district. There is rolling green dairy pasture watered by the stormy south-west, patches of remnant forest and small towns which reveal the richness of their past – old school buildings and solitary town halls. The area and the people who live here could be described in many ways and this was one of the first challenges for the Brucknell Project steering committee – is this a dairying community? Dairy farmers? A rural community? Small towns? A catchment



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community? Does anyone see themselves as part of the “Brucknell Creek catchment community” or is that a government term? Given our uncertainty, how do we engage this community? This was our dilemma and the solution, we thought, would be to develop a “community profile” – and maybe then, we thought, we would have a handle on who this community really is.

*Continued page 2 ...*

#### IN THIS ISSUE

#### Communities 1

*Josette O'Donnell details her attempts to get to know a community on its own terms. A fascinating story.*

#### Capacity building 4

*We've all heard the term, but what exactly does it mean? This story from RIRDC's CCS Corporation's Craig Brown paints education in a new light*

#### Extension online 5

*Grab bag of resources you can access from your desktop*

#### Your APEN 6-7

*Results from the 2003 members' survey. Also some news on chapter activity*

#### Policy forum 8-9

*A wrap up of the Sydney forum, including future plans*

#### MC report 10

APEN is pleased to acknowledge the support of:



## Who is the “community”? (cont’d from p1)

According to Fenton & Coakes<sup>1</sup>, “community profiling” involves documenting: the social environment in order to develop a more detailed understanding of the historical background of the community; the statistical profile of the community; contemporary issues; political and social structures; culture; and, attitudes towards the proposal or proposed change. Developing a community profile can therefore be considerable in scope or a small and definitive exercise yet limited as a consequence.

This was my first task as a community capacity building officer with the Victorian Department of Sustainability & Environment. After an introduction to social research methods and a general understanding of what the Steering committee and my project team needed, I headed into the unknown. Together we decided that as a first start, over a one month period I would collect information on:

- socio demographics, statistics, ABS data and past research on the community of the catchment and
- information on networks and community groups in the area.

In launching out into the field on this mission, I stopped at local shops and visited and spoke to residents of the catchment area that were prior contacts of extension staff. After introducing the project, I asked people about the community groups that were around, what they were like and entered into many general discussions on “what it’s like” in the community around here.

This is the kind of “research” that many extension officers do everyday - talking to people, finding out more about the community on which our projects focus - and through this informal research we often put together a “picture”, whether right or wrong, of who the community we work with is.

After a month of data collection and a “snowball sample” of talking to community residents and government/agency officers I was able to put together:

- a brief snapshot of the socio-demographics of the region
- a map of the community groups and networks in the catchment
- a brief synopsis of the smaller towns within the catchment, formed from conversations with people in the area.

The first presentation of this information to the project steering committee brought about some change in all of our perspectives:

“I assumed most were involved with agriculture – the profile showed a very large number in other fields of work” – dairy farmer, resident

“The community is far more active than I thought. There are many community groups and organisations that exist throughout the catchment.” – agency officer

“...the community already network together in many ways...” – resident.

As the community profiler my own perspective had changed too – I began to see the overwhelming nature of the question “who are the community?”.

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**“My own perspective had changed too – I began to see the overwhelming nature of the question ‘who are the community?’”**

### From the editor

I attended the extension policy forum in Sydney in July and I can’t help but feel there are exciting changes happening in the world of extension. While there was certainly a degree of studied introspection about the nature and role of extension (even, it goes without saying, some debate about the *definition* of extension), there was also some spirited talk about how extension is facing numerous opportunities to inject itself into community and catchment life. To me, debate at this level indicates a certain professional maturity amongst extension practitioners in this country and further afield, Experienced

extension professionals are beginning to see themselves as vanguards for change in regional and rural settings, rather than the folks left with the “donkey work” of cajoling clients into adopting a particular course of action already set by another agenda.

Still, there’s more work to do on developing a national framework. We’re closer than we were, but we’re still not close. However, I’m feeling confident that now the debate has been started (by APEN) it’ll be too important to leave extension policy in the too-hard basket.

Darren Schmidt



Each person that I had met was unique and had a different story to tell about this generic “community” and about their part in it. I began to see how frustratingly incomplete this work was – the data suggested there are around 2000 people in the Brucknell catchment area, and I had spoken to less than 50! For a small project steering committee with a big vision of agencies and residents working together towards a positive future - truly understanding “who” the community is and engaging them, is a huge task.

As the project developed and the steering committee met, we decided to hold a “community visioning BBQ”. Creating a vision for the future with the community is an essential step in a community development process. Residents and agency staff of the area got together to open up the pandora’s box of our hopes for the future of the Brucknell catchment area. The picture of the future that emerged, I soon discovered, was not unlike the visionary statements of government and industry agencies. I began to see and experience this commonality in vision – what people care about now and for the future. Surely, this common experience and common hope for what the future could be like brings us together as a bold new “community” – one which threads both government/industry officers and residents alike.

After this 10 month placement I was left with many questions and some simple answers to take forward in my life. Is the community their socio-demographic

statistics? Are they the community groups they attend or know of? Are they their families and histories? Their small towns? Are they their stories? Are they their visions for the future? Are they who we “consult” with? In my own experience – are they the people I met over the counter with whom I shared an unanticipated moment of connection?

I have discovered through this community profile that although I can try to define who a “community” is, and although it is possible to develop and put together a picture that can have enormous practical value, who the “community” is will always depend on our perspective. As government officers, do we choose to take a perspective that serves us and keeps things simple? Or are we ready to really question who we think the community is and how is it we think we are engaging them? For me, I have found refuge in the realm of community building and community development. As approaches to working with complex problems they have within them the capacity to create a shared identity and to transform the definition of community that we have. This shared vision and story and the connection which underlies it, is, I believe, the way forward as we work with our concerns for the environment and each other.

1 Fenton, D.M, and Coakes, S.J. *Social Impact Assessment and Water Resource Management: An Application of TC Analysis*, Unpublished paper, Sheridan Coakes Consulting, November 1998:4.



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## Changed the world? Tell us about it!

One of the most common pieces of feedback received at the ExtensionNet desk is the desire to see more reports about actual extension projects being run in the real world.

The editor couldn’t agree more. Nothing could gladden his heart more than to see high quality extension projects written up on these pages, with details of what went right and what went wrong and accompanied by some wonderful photographs.

The trouble is that these reports are trickling, rather than gushing, through the mailbox.

It’s understood and appreciated that sometimes the last thing you’ll want to do, after the mandatory reports have been printed and distributed, is to write *another* piece for ExtensionNet heralding your great strides forward in the field of extension.

Try to have some fun with it, though. The ExtensionNet editorial team isn’t nearly as stuffy as many other publications. Slip in a few jokes. Be controversial. But start writing.

Your peers are keen to hear about you. The editor’s keen to hear from you. And hopefully, you can resume by adding another publication to it. Go for it!



**Finished that project? Even half-way through? Write it down and get it to ExtensionNet!**

## Sure we know what capacity building means! (Don't we?)

Story by

Anne Currey

Naturally Resourceful Pty Ltd

We've all probably heard of the term capacity building but do we know what it is? Are you up-to-date with developments and research in the area? If you are interested in seeing what one group is doing in the area then I'd be happy to put you on the email list for the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building and Innovation in Rural Industries e-newsletter.

Members of the Cooperative Venture include most of the agricultural R&Ds in Australia, along with Murray-Darling Basin Commission. They believe that capacity building is an area worthy of research and education so in 2001 they formed a cooperative venture that has the aim of enhancing capacity building in rural industries.

### Projects on the go

Three major projects are on the go at present, focusing on:

- what works and why
- fostering involvement, and
- optimising institutional arrangements.

**What works and why** is examining:

1. extension and education programs being implemented around Australia, looking at best practice as a means of sharing and learning
2. how new guidelines, principles and tools will generate effective information and learning.

According to project manager, Jeff Coutts, extension and education programs fall under three distinct models:

- The Programmed Learning Model, where courses/workshops have been developed and are being run to improve specific skills and understanding;
- The Group Empowerment/Facilitation Model, where groups are provided with assistance to prioritise and seek their own learning and information needs
- The Technological Development Model, where a combination of methods are used (including farm visits) to assist landholders to improve specific management practices and technologies (for example irrigation efficiency).

Projects falling within each of these models are being analysed to see 'what worked and why' and what would project leaders have done differently next time around.

**Fostering involvement** is studying factors that inhibit farmer participation in learning activities so we can develop new processes to encourage participation, extension and learning.

**Institutional arrangements** is developing specific strategies to anticipate social, economic and technological changes that will influence the learning environment over the next 20 years. These changes have important implications for interest groups, industry and government.

If you would like to receive an email newsletter about the Cooperative Venture and its activities, send an email to [anne@naturallyresourceful.com.au](mailto:anne@naturallyresourceful.com.au) with "subscribe CV newsletter" in the subject line. For information go to website [www.rirdc.gov.au](http://www.rirdc.gov.au)

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Unlike buckets, humans have an infinite scope to build their capacity.

### Cooperative Venture also builds APEN's capacity

*RIRDC, through the Cooperative Venture, has recognised the pivotal role that APEN can play - through its members - in building the capacity of regional and rural Australians to effect change in their community and environment. As such it has supported a number of APEN events, particularly those related to the push for developing an extension policy. We're grateful for the help, but we also think it's a good investment in extension's future! APEN member John McKenzie is a program manager with the Co-operative Venture and is keen to see the relationship develop further.*