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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.

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APEN is pleased to acknowledge the support of:



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

According to Fenton & Coakes¹, “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.



Truly understanding “who” the community is and engaging them, is a huge task

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!

Diffusion of innovations

NEWS EVENTS IDEAS NEWS EVENTS IDEAS NEWS EVENTS IDEAS NEWS EVENTS

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 with "subscribe CV newsletter" in the subject line. For information go to website 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.

Extension online



Grassroots development

Last-First Networks is a non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing effective grassroots development. It raises awareness of proven practical approaches to working with the poorest and marginal groups of any society, and by resourcing practitioners and organisations who work with these groups. Their website at www.lastfirst.net features a vast range of resources (print, video, CD-ROM, World Wide Web, e-mail lists) that would be of general interest to the garden variety extensionist.

Last-First Networks focuses on community renewal, peace and conflict resolution, primary health care, agriculture, gender, globalisation, NGOs, training and more. Search for any of the 9,000+ resources by title, subtitle, author, keywords, ISBN and/or category.

Science communicators

Econnect (www.econnect.com.au) is a Queensland consultancy that "works with clients to create a positive difference to people's lives in Australia and in developing countries through communication". They are also prodigious publishers of some very thought-provoking articles and produce a quarterly newsletter. Subscribe at the site above. Hanging off their website is www.econnect.com.au/news_papers.htm which contains about a dozen papers that were presented at a science communication conference in Spain this year. They cover development, the challenge of communicating science, media skills and more. Good relevant reading for extension professionals.

Kansas worth a look

The Kansas State Uni Research and Extension site at www.oznet.ksu.edu is particularly rich in agricultural extension information (Kansas farms are amongst the most productive in the US).

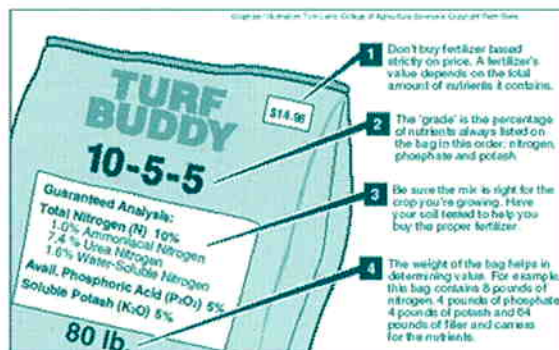
Penn State Uni

Penn State University, with its "cooperative extension and outreach" page, is so loaded with information, news, tips and tricks that any extension officer from around the world could stay for hours just looking. Find it at www.extension.psu.edu.

Programs include youth, agriculture, families, horticulture/gardening, community development, natural resources, nutrition and more. There's a huge collection of information under each of these headings which is laid out clearly and easy to navigate.

There is also a very useful section that points to extension resources, which is where most of us would have some fun. There's a large section on evaluation, e-business and publications. There's even a spot where you can download pdf graphics that would be useful in typical extension presentations.

We probably all wish our own online extension presence could look this good!



An example of one of Penn State Uni's free downloadable graphics. Aren't they cute?

APEN webpage under constant improvement

Some of you may have noticed the APEN webpage is a little easier to navigate these days. Full marks to Roger Johnson of the Regional Institute (and very involved APEN member) for undertaking the work. Some of the larger pages have been split up and are easier to load. It's not easy maintaining a web site using largely volunteer time, labour and resources, but the APEN site is a beauty. The future looks even better for APEN online, with plans to add an extension resources/toolkit facility. Watch this space.

APEN members set agenda

Results from the 2003 members survey

Story by Jane Weatherley (Tasmania)

APEN Management Committee



Jane's taken on the role of the Management Committee's evaluation specialist to ensure the MC's activities are measured for impact and efficiency.

Overall satisfaction of members has improved since 2001 from 2.8 to 3.4 out of 5

APEN is on the move!

An email survey was conducted by the Management Committee in 2003 to establish the importance and satisfaction that members have for APEN overall and its activities. A good response to the survey was generated, with 116 surveys completed. The survey questionnaire was developed using the extremely efficient php Surveyor computer software, which enabled the questionnaire to be completed electronically, and data automatically compiled ready for analysis. Further information about the software can be found at <http://phpsurveyor.sourceforge.net>.

APEN is on the move in terms of delivering more beneficial communications and activities, however there are still significant opportunities for APEN to improve its game, with some fantastic suggestions provided by respondents.

Members were asked for any comments they had about the services provided by APEN, what could we do differently that would make the greatest positive impact, and any other general comments they may have had.

Overall satisfaction of members has improved since 2001 from 2.8 to 3.4 out of 5. Key areas that have also improved are the website, the list serve, networking and professional development opportunities, which are all core business for APEN and is an excellent result.

In terms of services provided by APEN, ExtensionNet was a main focus for many respondents. For some, ExtensionNet was the main benefit they received from membership, with the short new member profiles and the articles on what is happening in other chapters being popular. Many suggestions on how ExtensionNet could be improved were provided, including articles being more practical rather than theoretical, becoming a peer reviewed journal and, a section that highlights the edition's learnings for extension and extension tips.

The website received considerable attention, with members suggesting it could be improved through being more interactive and offering additional resources. Having more information and updates electronically delivered was also a suggestion.

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So what are you going to do about it?

In terms of what the MC could do to have the greatest impact, each area of the MC was provided with some excellent suggestions. Many of these areas are already being progressed by the MC, particularly in the areas of marketing and policy:

- Management could be less academic and move forward with the reform of the local chapters and name change.
- Finances could be seeking sponsorship and commercialising professional development opportunities.
- Marketing could be infiltrating the senior management of agencies, developing a higher profile of the organisation and broadening the base of membership.
- Communications could be more electronically based, and a professional refereed journal initiated.
- Chapter support continues to be a large area for improvement and needs to be a major focus to help local groups to be more active.
- Events in addition to conferences and forums, could include the national roadshow and a calendar of formal training opportunities for extension professionals.
- And policy could be taking a strategic stand on what APEN is all about.

Your APEN - your network

Raising the profile of the extension profession through representation and policy was another focus for respondents. The current steps being made by APEN in the policy area received considerable approval and are seen as vital for APEN to be seen as the leading organisation for extension professionals.

Members provided an indication of the challenges APEN will face in the future: staying focussed on agriculture and being clear about extension; finding new ways to inform institutional decision making and reform processes; maintaining benefits for those practitioners in the 'bush'; and, maintaining and improving services and resources for APEN members.

And finally a big thank you to all the participants who completed the survey despite their busy schedules. Overall, the comments provided were extremely positive, and provided an extremely useful basis on which APEN can be continually improved to meet the needs of members. The survey is a useful instrument to assist the MC to ensure that APEN membership is delivering multiple benefits to members that are relevant, timely and beneficial to the extension profession. The MC is committed to responding to the outcomes, which will help to keep APEN to continue moving forward for the benefit of members.

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All surveyed out?

Sorry! It seems we've been asking members quite often lately for their opinion on how various aspects of APEN are running, or for their input into events like the Extension Policy forum held recently in Sydney. We realise it can be a little draining, which is why we try to make it as easy as possible to answer and submit the surveys. They are as short as we can make them and these days invariably conducted wholly online.

Many members seem to happily give their time to fill out the surveys, which gives the MC the clearest picture possible on how APEN is feeling and thinking. Thanks for all your input, and if there's something else you need to say, we're all ears!

Queensland evaluation forum gets the big tick

There'll be more details in the next edition of ExtensionNet, but this August event held in Brisbane attracted 80 professionals from all over Queensland and interstate. That's a big attendance for a locally organised APEN event. Talk was that the topic - **evaluation** - was the star attraction and it's a fair bet that other chapters/clusters might meet with similar success with the same topic in their own region. Why not give it a go?



Jane Wilkins, Jessica Martin (Qld Health) and Alison Heywood (Heywood Public Health Group) discuss evaluation at the APEN event

APEN member in the news - congrats Cathy!

Back in June, ABC rural news threw the spotlight on APEN's very own Cathy McGowan from the Murray-Riverina. Cathy picked up a Queen's Birthday honours gong for her ongoing work with women in agriculture. APEN recognised Cathy's (and Cheryl Phillips') excellent work in 2001 conference for their roles in the Women in Dairy project. Here's the ABC transcript:

A founding member of Australian Women In Agriculture has been named an officer of the Order of Australia for stimulating debate about women's issues in rural areas.

Cathy McGowan has also chaired the Regional Women's Advisory Council, and been part of a government advisory committee to the World Trade Organisation.

Ms McGowan says her award is a recognition of the work all rural women do.

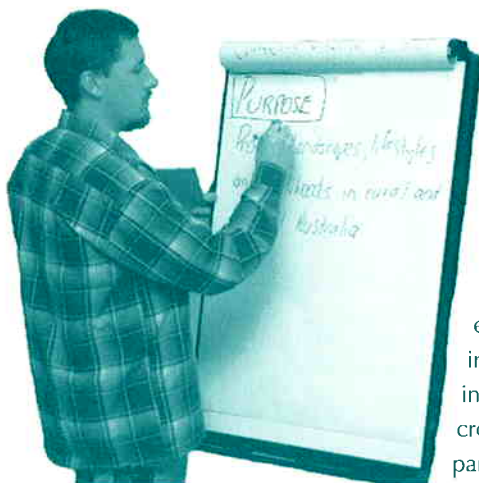
'I'm so pleased to get this award, because I think what will happen is the women I work with, all those women in Women in Horticulture groups and the Women in Dairy groups, and Australian women in ag groups, and the Partners in Grain - they're going to go - oh, that's for us.

'It's not actually about Cathy; it's actually about the women in agriculture movement that's being acknowledged, and the recognition that we're really important; and I think that's what I'm so pleased about.'

words courtesy ABC Radio

Closer to a national framework for extension: the Sydney policy forum

Story by Sue Vize



One of the organisers of the Sydney forum, Greg Leach, undertakes some purposeful work

Over fifty professionals with a passion for ensuring a vibrant future for rural and regional Australia moved to define and embrace a new paradigm for extension at a two-day July forum in Sydney. Though the forum involved considerable debate and crossed-purposes among the participants, it secured agreement on a path forward to developing a national extension framework. The forum agreed that the time is ripe for re-negotiating extension policy in Australia to meet new regional decision-making approaches in natural resource management, as well as the ongoing reforms in agriculture and its support services.

Andrew Campbell, Executive Director Land and Water Australia, proposed four key components to take extension policy forward in Australia. He called for stakeholders to:

- design meta-learning systems
- re-energise the profession
- build a new infrastructure
- define extension's niche among a range of policy instruments.

Andrew also referred to the Triple Helix of **lifestyles, landscapes and livelihoods**, as the essence of rural and regional Australia.

The forum later supported Leith Bouilly's suggestion that the purpose of extension today is to: *Protect, maintain and enhance landscapes, lifestyles and livelihoods for the benefit of all Australians in urban, rural and regional places.*

Happy bunch: Carolyn Cameron talks policy with Warren Straw and Cynthia Mahoney

Russell Pell from the Goulburn-Broken Catchment Management Authority in Victoria went further to suggest that extension needs to empower the community and deliver services across a range of private (farm business) and public (natural resource management) providers.

Current context – current issues

A range of issues that need to be addressed for extension to play an effective role in supporting change processes with rural people were identified at the forum. Key among these were:

- **unclear definitions create confusion** and hamper: decision-making processes about extension at all scales; the use of extension as an instrument to achieve outcomes; government's intrinsic responsibility of identifying roles and responsibilities; defensible claims for funding support, and; the very values and principles of extension
- **lack of extension infrastructure** limits net service delivery
- **languishing quality, standards, best practice** is hampering continuous improvement in extension practice and the extension discipline even if extension networks are active
- **a lack of professional development** is: reducing skills in extension; limiting the deliberative management of skills and identification of resource providers; eroding core competencies and preventing accreditation; and, impeding the recruitment of young people into a career path (with most contracts being temporary)
- **reduced public/private funding** limits service delivery, outcomes and career development
- **inadequate information availability** continues to plague extension practitioners.

Elements of a National Extension Framework were developed by participants at the Sydney forum to increase effectiveness and efficiency of behavioural change management through extension, including:

