



Australian
Landcare
Council

Engaging the 20-something year old in Landcare

In the context of Australian Government natural resource
management policy and programs

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Context

This paper was prepared as part of the Australian Landcare Council's investigation into *activities and support required to improve volunteer recruitment and retention*. The paper was also presented at the National Landcare Conference 2012, Sydney.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of fellow council members, Ms Vicki-Jo Russell and Ms Alexandra Gartmann for their input to the finalization of the report.

This paper is prepared based on my own experiences as a young person in Landcare, and working with other young people in this field.

I am a member of Generation Y—those born between 1980 and 1999.

I was a regular volunteer with the Bannister Creek Catchment Group while I studied Environmental Science at Murdoch University, Western Australia before gaining employment as a Landcare Officer for the Dumbleyung Landcare Zone, then the Katanning Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC). I was a founding volunteer member of the WA Scout Environment Awareness Program, providing environmental education to Scouts aged 6–26 years. I was appointed to the Australian Landcare Council at age 29.

This paper is intended to share my knowledge about successfully engaging the 20-somethings in Landcare, drawing on both my own experience and what I have learned from talking to young people and those who work with young people in Landcare.

I hope these insights will be useful for groups or individuals who are seeking to understand how to engage with young people, and to assist policy and program designers with developing institutional arrangements to best support this age group in Landcare.

Note: Throughout this report, 'Landcare groups' refers to the broad range of groups operating in community environmental, natural resource management and sustainable agriculture in Australia, including Bushcare, Coastcare, Friends of, and production groups.

The issue

People involved in Landcare programs frequently talk about the need to 'engage young people' and express that young people are critical to the future of Landcare.

Landcare has strong involvement with children through school programs, Scouts and Junior Landcare, fostering an ethos of environmental responsibility. However, this structured commitment often doesn't continue once these children become young adults and/or leave the formal education environment.

Landcare groups look to 20-something year olds for succession planning, group longevity and as fit and strong people to do the physical work. Their lack of family commitments (many aren't parents yet), personal focus on leisure activities and relatively good rates of volunteering in the community creates the impression that they should be interested in becoming a Landcare Group member.

Much engagement and recruitment energy is currently focused at Gen Ys, for relatively few gains in recruiting membership or volunteer contributions. This is currently considered as a failure to engage young people, which can concern older generations and create a sense of disillusionment about the future of Landcare.

Older Landcare members can feel that young people lack good community and environmental values. However, this cohort does have these values, but express them in different ways that may not be as readily recognised.

I believe that today's 20-somethings are not the answer to current volunteer and membership issues within Landcare. But engagement with this group can have different positive outcomes and be highly successful for the longer term.

Understanding Generation Y

The cohort known as Generation Y—born between 1980 and 1999 (McQueen 2010)—in 2013 ranges from teenagers to people in their early 30s. It includes the 20-something age group that is the focus of this paper.

Members of Australia's Generation Y are generally well-educated, highly mobile, technologically savvy, busy and well-connected. They have been brought up in a politically correct world, and have been encouraged to question what they are told things—giving them the nickname 'Gen Why Not?'. They do not automatically respect elders or those in authority; respect must be earned and reciprocated.

Generation Ys are loyal to their friends. Many Generation Ys are motivated, empowered and highly successful, and make excellent employees. They are well-informed about global issues such as poverty and the environment. They access information rapidly and extensively, and are innovators when given the opportunity. The success of social media with this age group reflects their desire to be well-connected and to embrace innovation.

They can also be egocentric, believe the world owes them something and are accustomed to instant gratification.

Generation Ys have a number of values in common with other generations. They are generally concerned citizens, value family, value freedom and the Australian way of life and are keen to learn from those around them. Generation Ys, like other generations, want to be valued, taken seriously, and feel a sense of purpose and belonging.

Remembering from your own experience that there is a lot to cram in to the 20s is part-way to connecting to this cohort. The differences between today's 20-somethings and those of previous generations lie in how Australian society and culture has changed with the introduction of globalisation, domestic technologies and an ever increasing pace of life. Like every generation before it, Gen Ys express themselves and their values as a response to the economic, political and environmental climate in which they find themselves.

Priorities of a 20-something

The 20s is an important transitional period from adolescence to adulthood for everyone, regardless of whether they went through it 50 years ago or more recently. One might begin their 20s as a full-time student or apprentice, living at home, largely supported financially by parents, and finish their 20s married, perhaps with a young family, career underway and in their own home.

I suggest that the activities that a 20-something year old will spend the vast majority of their time engaged in can be categorised into four key priority areas.

1. Pushing boundaries

The 20-somethings is a time of testing limits, discovering oneself and finding your own niche in the world. Typical activities include:

- partying
- travelling; for example, backpacking around Europe or South America
- adventure or elite sports
- expressing their individuality through personal appearance; for example with tattoos, dress style, piercings
- challenging or exploring religion/beliefs
- trying something new, including using existing organisational/institutional structures to support these new activities.

2. Relationships

A lot of time is devoted to peer groups, with a shift toward family in the later years of their 20s.

- socialising in large groups, often sharing a common 'look' or interest
- dating and more serious relationships
- shifts in friend circles as life changes occur
- moving in with and/or marrying a life partner
- starting a family.

3. Career

Gen Ys can be ambitious and like to be successful, not sticking at a job that they dislike or don't feel valued in. Loyalty rarely extends to an institution/company but a personal relationship with the people can be very strong. Gen Ys will be spending their time on:

- tertiary study (TAFE/university/apprenticeship)
- work experience that is likely to lead to employment
- full-time employment
- actively seeking promotion, salary increases, increased flexibility and autonomy

4. Personal comforts

Gen Ys often experience a great deal of peer pressure to keep up with the latest trends such as technology, and also see the period of their 20s as one in which to get themselves set up for later life. However, this is expensive, placing extra pressure on career and in some cases leading unfortunately to debt issues. Gen Ys may aim for:

- a reliable car
- technology—including smart phone, computer tablet and home entertainment system
- house and furniture—many first home buyers are taking out considerable mortgages to purchase new homes in nice suburbs, or are renting such places
- nice clothing and to socialise in nice places such as restaurants and trendy bars.

Challenge what ‘successful engagement’ really means

Most of today’s 20-somethings do not prioritise a full commitment to Landcare, through joining committees or participating regularly.

However, this does not mean that they do not agree with the principles or ethics of Landcare or will not become active members in the future—many Generation Ys do have a deep concern for and understanding of the environment. Landcare groups need to think more long term when interacting with 20-somethings.

I propose that engagement strategies for the 20-somethings should be seen as bridging the gap between the Landcare exposure they received during their formal schooling and the opportunity for more committed engagement once they reach their mid-30s or older.

Successful engagement should be seen as actively and meaningfully engaging the individual on approximately five to eight individual occasions over the span of the 10 years.

Infrequent but repeated engagement with the 20-somethings over time ensures they have positive Landcare experiences, it is kept in their mind and they remain aware of Landcare’s role and value. The objective should be to maintain these people’s engagement over the decade of their 20s, ready for more commitment in Landcare once they’re more settled and in their 30s or 40s.

Engagement principles

20-somethings will prioritise their time for activities that meets their goals in one of the four key areas: pushing boundaries, relationships, career or personal comforts. Groups such as Landcare seeking to engage with 20-somethings should consider how their engagement strategies, plus the activities and opportunities they offer young people, align with these four areas.

They may need to focus on a long-term investment in active committee members and volunteers, which may not be realised for 5–10 years. Funding programs should support these long-term outcomes.

To encourage young people to participate, it is important that the opportunities for engagement do not require significant commitment from the individual. 20-somethings are busy with other priorities, and will consider it a negative experience if it is not easy to join in, reducing their chances of actively connecting with Landcare in the future. One-off, unique experiences can be better than long-term programs in meeting these needs.

It is important not to have high expectations of young participants that they will become a member, attend regular meetings, or participate in long-term off-farm programs, as this may scare them off. They will strongly engage when they are ready, providing that their past experiences were positive.

The opportunities also have to be meaningful. Generation Ys have a high level of self-importance, and are keen to take on responsibility. The opportunity has to be worthy of their time and able to make a tangible contribution to the environment, the individual or the group itself. The task they actually do does not need to be easy though—they love a good challenge.

There will always be individuals or groups of 20-somethings who will make regular contributions to Landcare. As with any good volunteer management, it's important to understand their drivers for being involved and support them as required.

Examples of successful activities

Linking an activity to the four priority areas can attract the attention of a young person, and encourage them to participate. If an activity can meet their needs in one (or more) of their priority areas, it becomes more attractive for them to engage in.

Examples of where Landcare activities have complemented outcomes from the four priority areas and resulted in engagement of young people are presented against each area, with four case studies giving further detail.

Career

- Many Landcare officers are in their 20s and have an excellent ability to link with other young people in the district (their friends). However, poor career pathways, lack of job stability and lower pay compared with other industries often sees them leave.
- Young farmers undertaking Landcare works on their own properties are an important group of Gen Y participants. The health of their land is central to the success of their career. They are less likely to undertake or participate in works on public land, or land that doesn't affect their own farm. Engaging and supporting them through on-farm programs such as Community Action Grants and relevant local field days are important. In many instances, these young farmers engage with Landcare individually rather than as a group.
- Work experience is a very strong link for engaging young people. Young people will give time to volunteer causes if they are able to gain valuable industry contacts, improve their chances of employment, or undertake additional training. Ensure that any young people who attend an event are offered something in writing as evidence of their participation. Insurance issues can limit a group's ability to provide work experience.
- Landcare should also consider engaging people who are advanced students; that is, 3rd year or postgraduate, as this is a time for forming lots of views and making decisions about who you are, what you want to do and the key principles of success for that career.

Case study 1: Young Farmers Kontiki Tour

Held approximately every two years in the Upper Blackwood region of WA, the name Young Farmers Kontiki Tour plays on the similarity with the famous travel company—a diverse group of young people on a bus, travelling, seeing new things and having fun. Inspired by a lack of young farmers at field days and workshops, the event was formed to give young people (18–30) in agriculture a way to come together locally, learn, establish professional networks, explore industry-related topics and enjoy participating with Landcare.

Each event is directed by 2–3 young farmers from the district who advise on relevant topics and field visit sites, then the event is coordinated by the young Landcare officers of the Upper Blackwood. Three Kontiki tours have been single-day events (one has been overnight) allowing more areas to be explored. Topics and site visits have included the Albany CBH Grain Port facility, Q-Lamb abattoir, oil mallee plantation, biodiesel processing site, deep drainage for salinity control, saltland pastures, EM38 salinity survey demonstration, presentations from WA's young farmer of the year and an international merino exchange, mental health and business goal setting. Effort is made to ensure many presenters and host farmers are also young people, and the day is conducted with plenty of light-hearted fun, including quizzes on the bus and a barbecue to wrap the day up.

Kontiki Tours have been funded through WA Office of Children and Youth, South West Catchments Council and DAFF Next Gen Farmers grants.

Relationships

- Young people are keen to meet other young people. If members of a group are much older, it is unlikely that one person in their 20s will choose to join, compared with a group of their own age. Creating opportunities and events where 20-somethings are the main attendees are more likely to be successful.
- The television show 'The Farmer Wants a Wife' is very successful, and reflects the importance of relationships to young farmers. When running an activity focusing on young farmers it is worthwhile encouraging a mixed gender audience. Even in communities dominated by young men, young women can still be found working in Landcare, agribusiness, agronomy and the media, and it's important they are invited and feel included.
- The opportunity for mentors is important. Some Gen Y's have come from single parent families, and awareness of risks to child protection often mean that young people haven't been able to form close bonds with other adults eg coaches, resulting in a lack of mentor/mentee relationships. Young people can be enthusiastic about participating with and learning from older people. Traditional Indigenous knowledge being passed from elders to young men and women is an example of such mutually beneficial engagement.

- Landcare can make use of existing groups of young people, where they can participate as a group of friends. Groups such as sporting clubs, Rural Youth and Rover Scouts can be offered opportunities to do both on-ground and support activities such as tree planting or cooking a BBQ for volunteers as a fundraiser, towards badges/competencies or as a fun and different day out.

Case study 2: Landcare for Singles

Started in the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges district of Victoria in 2011, the Landcare for Singles event is based on the concept of speed dating, but tailored for outdoorsy/environmentally minded people. The event attracted over 100 participants, most of whom were new to Landcare. Following its launch as a national program by Landcare Australia Ltd, events have been held across Australia.

The event is based around tree planting, and participants swap planting partners regularly in a loosely facilitated environment, resulting in each person meeting and interacting with a range of people as they undertake revegetation work. The events culminate in a social occasion, such as an evening party with food and live music. People can exchange contact details and engage in further conversation with others.

The event not only results in environmental outcomes, but important social outcomes. Even if the participant doesn't find a partner, they become familiar with Landcare in their area through an enjoyable event, which increases the chance that they will participate in other Landcare events in the future.

Pushing boundaries

- Some creative thinking may be needed to get young people involved, especially where Landcare doesn't have a 'cool' local image. Ask some young people to brainstorm ideas, and don't discount the ones that seem radical. Funding programs need to be prepared to support innovative ideas.
- Travelling is part of the pushing boundaries ethos, so Young Farmer Tours and rural exchanges are popular. Taking the young people away on a study tour out of their own district, getting them behind the scenes of something they wouldn't normally get to see, and having fun while they do it, can lead to positive outcomes.
- Many creative ideas have been successfully implemented. Greening Australia WA, 'TrancePlant' in Victoria and others have had success with 'doov-doo tree planting'. A DJ playing loud dance music sets up in the planting field and young people are encouraged to 'party while they plant'. The event carries on after the trees are in with the DJ and food well into the evening. Willow Warriors run Extreme Weeding events in NSW, requiring volunteers to kayak or raft to weed willows in gorges and canyons.

Case study 3: Red Card for the Red Fox

Fox shooting has been a very good engagement tool for young people in the WA agricultural region. The annual Red Card for the Red Fox coordinated control program encourages landholders to participate in feral animal control activities during a fortnight autumn 'hot period'. Over 50 Local Government Areas participate in the program, with most of them hosting a fox shoot as part of their local effort.

The fox shoots have been a great success for engaging the 20-somethings, particularly males. Many teams are made up of this demographic and thoroughly enjoy a night out with their mates getting into friendly competition with other teams for 'most foxes', 'biggest rabbit', etc. As well as having fun, they are assisting to protect native wildlife from foxes and other feral animals.

Through the fox shoots, the participants are actively engaged in Landcare once a year—registering their team, participating, attending the tally count with the rest of the community and hoping to get their name on the perpetual trophy housed in the local Landcare Centre.

Personal comforts

- With such a large proportion of this category having access to technology, the use of social media can be a powerful tool for promotions and story sharing.
- Online social networks can create a sense of community, connection and belonging for young people. There are many examples of young people joining Landcare networks through these platforms.
- A young person in the 1970s may have taken to the streets in a protest march to show their support for a cause, but one in the 2010s is more likely to make contributions to worthy causes like the environment through online actions such as joining an online forum, linking friends to an article about an important issue, viewing YouTube footage or following Twitter or a Facebook page.
- It's important that approaches to young people are framed in the way that young people are communicating, and through the channels that this cohort are comfortable with. This can include text messaging, social media and spoken language.

Case Study 4: Illawarra Youth Landcare Group (IYLG)

This Landcare Group comprising young people is unique because they do not undertake specific projects of their own. Instead, they travel and assist other Landcare groups as needed.

The group has the flexibility to vary their time commitment to suit their needs, and are able to engage in Landcare with a more 'no strings attached' approach than other Landcare groups. Because they assist other projects, they are not responsible for the long-term care of the site, administering grants, and aren't so dependent on funding cycles. However, they do make a valuable contribution to the environment and the host groups to whom they provide free labour. Important learning is achieved between the host groups and the young people at IYLG.

A key element of their success is the importance placed on social interaction, recognising that if it's not fun volunteers won't return. Every activity is coupled with a social activity such as a barbecue or swim after a day's work. 2–3 overnight trips are held per year, which gives the group plenty of opportunity to bond and form friendships. Engagement is the primary outcome sought by the group, with environmental outcomes secondary.

The Illawarra Youth Landcare Group is a valuable source of both labour and morale-boosting support for other Landcare groups; however, their needs are not well met by current funding programs. Criteria for funding often focuses on the biophysical outcomes rather than the engagement benefits of the event itself, and consequently IYLG has been limited in its ability to extend the role beyond the three Local Government Areas it mainly services.

Based on information from Megan Rowlett [Illawarra Youth Landcare Group] 2012, pers. comm., 15 March 2012.

Program recommendations

Future programs that seek to engage 20 to 30 year olds in Landcare could adopt the following principles in program design and implementation.

1. **Flexible**—design to be able to take into account diverse local priorities and interests, and changes in these.
2. **Social**—opportunity for positive social interaction to be recognised as a key driver for participation, and at times the main driver.
3. **One-off/short-term activity**—the proposed activity need not be part of an ongoing program; however, if the event has been held previously, this should not exclude it from a funding opportunity.
4. **Creative**—consider creative ways to engage in the Landcare ethos and outcomes, and don't be afraid to try something different.
5. **Long-term outcomes**—results may contribute to an engagement outcome beyond the life of the funding program.

A specific funding stream for encouraging appropriate engagement of 20-somethings in Landcare across Australia could be considered. This program could include opportunities for groups to undertake training to increase their own capacity to engage with other young people.

Summary

Each generation of Australians has a role to play in Landcare. While most current Landcare volunteers are Builders (born pre-1945) and Baby Boomers (1945–1965), members of generations X, Y and Z also participate.

While this paper has focused specifically on Generation Y 20-something year olds, there is value in further work to look at appropriate and specific engagement strategies for other groups, particularly for Generation X (1965–1979). Gen X is also currently under-represented in the Landcare structure, but have their own issues and drivers to be considered.

As Generation Z (born 2000–current) grows up, Landcare will again have to adapt to that generation’s unique circumstances.

Landcare is a movement, which means it can be flexible and adapt over time. Landcare has always developed unique, locally appropriate and successful methods for dealing with issues of natural resource management, and with the right support and information it can also successfully adapt its methods to meet volunteers’ needs.

References

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