



Members of B4C at a working bee,
Bulimba Creek Catchment

2 | Community Mobilisation

Communities and volunteers contribute immense resources to watershed restoration and conservation efforts through their local knowledge and expertise, practical skills and physical labour, time, moral support, fund raising and word-of-mouth promotional role. Management of natural resources including river systems is dependent upon community and volunteer activity (Syme & Johnston, 2006).

Participation and real involvement of the community in river management initiatives, in combination with effective communication, engender community empowerment and a sense of community ownership of the river system (Koehn et al. 2001). When grass roots community and land user conservation activity is clearly evident across a river system, one can recognise a sense of community ownership, and the river's critical importance to those living in the community. Community involvement is indeed a fundamental part of best practice management of river systems.

The people living within a watershed are an important source of local knowledge of the ecosystem as well as the social system, and are essential contributors of labour and imagination needed for changing land practices in the river system. Community groups are therefore crucial stakeholders in planning, target-setting and restoration action. The level of involvement and ownership that people in the river system experience is a key element in creating the changes necessary for improved land use across catchments.

In the Bulimba Creek Catchment, Queensland, and Blackwood Basin, Western Australia, imaginative and energetic mobilisation of local communities has been the core strength underpinning their award winning successes in river restoration and management. The Bulimba Creek Catchment Coordinating Committee (B4C) engaged volunteers to remove invasive species from waterways, plant hundreds of thousands of native trees and plants, and protect habitats of native fauna.

The Blackwood Basin Group (BBG), adopted a unique consultative, collaborative and farmer friendly approach to engage and nurture a strong local community and landholder program in restoring and protecting vegetation and overall water quality within their rural watershed. The decentralised model of decision making facilitated by the BBG enables effective management of the Blackwood river system as it addresses the mismatch between government and environmental and social boundaries evident in the region (Brunckhorst, 2006).



Water Hyacinth removal in the Bulimba Creek Catchment

Bulimba Creek, Queensland, Australia

For several decades the Bulimba Creek Catchment experienced above-average urban growth, with residential and major infrastructure development encroaching on key waterways, wetlands and floodplains. Urban growth pressures brought inappropriate land use, tree clearing and invasive species contributing to loss of green space, loss of floodplain and wetland function and water quality, and deterioration in natural aesthetic, recreational and biodiversity assets across the catchment.

Establishment of the Bulimba Creek Catchment Coordination Committee (B4C) in 1997 was almost entirely community driven. As a cleverly engaged group, its novel secret to achieving exceptional growth and survival was to implement several self-managed income sources, including a registered charity (Bulimba Creek Environment Fund), a nursery, and a professional environmental contracting arm (Ecosystems Services Unit) which conducts works on waterways, wetlands and bushlands for government, industry and community.

Whilst this helped ensure sustainability of the organisation, management of the river system needed more. B4C developed partnerships with a wide range of government agencies, corporations and industry leaders, educational institutions and bush care groups, with a primary goal to broaden out the awareness of problems occurring within the river system, and to mobilise more resources toward restoration and management initiatives.

The friendships that have formed between the people in these groups are in part why they have been so successful. Wayne Cameron, President of the B4C, explained that 'overall, [B4C] has created an atmosphere of inclusive friendship while working

for the community. People like to be active and appreciated, and want to make a difference and to do so where there is a social aspect. Friendly faces and new friends have been key'. Wayne also explained that it is important to give volunteers a set place to go, and allow them to work at their own pace, and that the volunteer-run nursery at B4C fulfils these needs.



'Volunteers still hold a vital role. They can fill the gaps and add value to such an organisation. It is them we must nurture and appreciate, because without them we lose the reason we started all this.'

Wayne Cameron
PRESIDENT OF THE B4C

Indigenous land owners and holders of traditional cultural knowledge and heritage were engaged on surveys and consultations for rehabilitation projects. Community volunteers became very adept at planting trees, creating habitats for native fauna, and revitalising ecological function of waterways. The combined efforts of B4C and its brigades of volunteers helped to combat tree clearing, protect key habitats, re-establish ecosystems, and remove invasive species from the waterways and bushlands. The resultant water quality improvements throughout the watershed have brought wetland function back to life.

Over 300,000 volunteer hours of work resulted in the protection of 426 ha of urban bushland areas, creation of 362 ha of habitat and planting of over 255,000 native trees and plants.

Lessons learnt

Bulimba Creek Catchment Coordinating Committee have started to use their expertise to assist other catchment groups, and they can speak with the wisdom of several important lessons learnt about mobilising communities. Wayne Cameron provides the following advice:

Budget

Always establish a complete budget before undertaking an on-ground project. This is especially important where employed personnel and other overheads are concerned. Linking government grants to corporate sponsorship is necessary to achieve an adequate budget for catchment management initiatives. Volunteering can assist with budgetary constraints, but must not be taken for granted in budgeting.

A scientific basis brings credibility to community projects

Research and verify your work scientifically, compare planned work with case studies where similar work has been undertaken and note the outcomes.

Integrate scientific community and academia into grass roots projects wherever possible

Independent expert advice and independent scientific evaluation and surveys are necessary. Monitoring data can only be legally accepted (for example in court decisions, or to influence legislation) if it is collected or supervised by scientists.

Monitor watershed health

Proper monitoring and evaluation, with professional help is essential to provide evidence of progress as well as to review directions for the river management program. Bird surveys, for instance, are good indicators of biodiversity and ecosystem health.

A motivated community does more than plant trees. For example, B4C and its volunteers also campaigned for low-impact nature-based recreation opportunities and the protection of public amenity open spaces, participated in key urban planning advocating ecologically sustainable development and delivered environmental educational services to schools and the wider community.

‘The basics of what we’re trying to do in Bulimba Creek is to protect, restore and maintain. Everything is based around that. We’ve got to **protect** our natural systems. Then we have to rehabilitate them or **restore** them. That requires work on the ground and public education. But then you have to **maintain** those things, which means not only project maintenance but the catchment committee working into the future, an expansion of networking and getting people involved. If any one of those three principles drops away, it doesn’t really work.’

Wayne Cameron
PRESIDENT OF THE B4C

River System	Bulimba Creek Catchment, South-East Queensland, Australia
Length	120 km
Area	122 km ²
Origin, Tributaries etc	Bulimba Creek consists of eight main tributaries and five wetland systems, and flows continuously to the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay. It originates in the foothills of Runcorn (western leg) and Kuraby (eastern). Sub-catchment creeks link major natural areas to major creek corridor.
Population	122,000 (estimated 2000)
Role of River System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystem services: storm water discharge, drainage, flood mitigation, recharge (wetlands, floodplains), sediment removal, uptake of nutrients and absorption of pollutants, flushing of contaminants and organic matter • Provides habitat for fauna and flora • Produces fish and crustaceans for fishing grounds of Moreton Bay • Provides landscape amenities and recreational assets
Riverprize	2005 National Thiers Riverprize Winner



The Future

‘Winning the 2005 National Thiers Riverprize has really increased the profile of B4C’, said President Wayne Cameron, who explained that he has since been invited to advise governments on a variety of social, environmental and economic issues and to raise community environmental issues. Wayne believes that winning the Thiers Riverprize has increased corporate sponsorship and encouraged the government to take B4C seriously, treating them ‘now as a genuine community voice representing the community’. The award was also a boost for their community awareness work and for volunteer recruitment and retention.

Educational initiatives continue to progress, and kits are being developed and adapted to suit different schools and other watershed management organisations. A Sustainability Centre incorporating a sustainable office, community nursery, water-wise gardens and displays of sustainable technologies is underway. B4C continues to lobby and advocate for environmental education and awareness, and reduction of the pressures of inappropriate developments.



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Blackwook River at Karridale

Blackwood Basin, Western Australia

Blackwood Basin in Western Australia faced several serious health issues prior to the 1990s. Cattle damage to river banks, increasing sediment deposits, salinity and decreasing biodiversity of marine species were of wide spread concern to the local community. As well as damaging the river, these issues, and dryland salinity in particular, represented serious threats to the future of agricultural farming in the region.

The Blackwood Basin Group (BBG) was established by concerned community members, conservationists, farmers and industry representatives in an attempt to reverse the degradation of the river and watershed. As the targets set for improving ground and surface water resources and addressing rising salinity and failing water quality were ambitious, wide spread action was needed by a majority of landholders across the catchment.

From the beginning, the Blackwood Basin Group introduced a strong culture of community consultation and a farmer friendly approach with landholders to nurture support that would produce willful change and lasting commitment. A great deal of effort was invested in selecting project officers or community liaison people, passionate about working in the field with landholders and the community. This helped to ensure a strong culture of working well together. As Linda Raynor, Strategic Leader, Sub-regional Coordinator, explained 'it is important to pull the right team together and get a good mix of experience and maturity and young, friendly enthusiastic people as well ... I think we've been doing this quite successfully'.

Another vital step that enabled them to reach so many community members and landholders was the adoption of nine regional areas in the catchment and a concept called

Zone Action Planning, in which community-nominated committees participated in decisions over regional funding recommendations (Marshall, 2007). The Zone Action Planning approach addressed sustainable agriculture, natural resource management and environmental priorities through the development and implementation of management plans in each of the nine regional zones. Community-led programs established under this framework managed weeds, protected biodiversity, improved information access and conducted scientific studies on the biophysical, social and economic characteristics of the basin. Native vegetation was protected and restored in further attempts to improve the water quality within the watershed.



The effectiveness of this style of nested governance system lies in its decentralised decision making. Decentralised decision making enhances local knowledge, strengthens the legitimacy of decisions and, by allowing smaller groups to experiment with different decisions and courses of action, reduces the probability of failure for a larger region (Ostrom, 1999).

River System	Blackwood River, Western Australia
Length	300 km
Area	23,500 km ²
Origin, Tributaries etc	Flows from the South-West of Western Australia to Flinders Bay at Augusta
Population	400,000
Role of River System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports agriculture (78% of the catchment)
Riverprize	2001 International Thiess Riverprize Winner

Lessons learnt

The BBG speaks from experience when it says that a community-based organisation can sustain dramatic funding shortages when they have developed:

Dedicated staff

Staff live in the region and have a local connection to the BBG and existing social structures.

'We employ people suited to the job not a "bum on a seat"... These people are well known already to the communities they represent, and become known as the natural resource management representative in sporting clubs, local pubs and youth and other community groups.'

Greg Hales

PROGRAM MANAGER, BBG

Community support

Community faith in the organisation's ability to persist is driven by the fact that the organisation originated within the general community, and involves the community at every step of any restoration processes. Community education initiatives are developed in response from community. 'We go to the community and don't wait for the community to come to us', said Greg Hales.

Relationships

Those involved in river system restoration and management initiatives coordinated by the BBG enjoy working together. A strong culture of friendliness, ethical motivations and absence of internal conflict 'allow networks to flow'.

'This community group is able to have different ideas and opinions but discuss them in a meeting and still be great friends.'

Linda Raynor

STRATEGIC LEADER, BBG

Identity

The community in the Blackwood basin strongly identifies with the river and basin. Because there is no regional town located on the river, and no government officer located in the region, community involvement through the BBG's Zone Action Planning is imperative to the success of river management initiatives. 'There is a really strong sense of identity of looking after the river and its basin', said Linda Raynor.

The Future

Being awarded the International Thies Riverprize in 2001 certainly increased the credibility as well as the local, regional, state and international profile of the BBG.

However, changes in government, and therefore to funding arrangements, meant that the BBG was unable to take advantage of the status of the Thies Riverprize to leverage additional funding or to exert influence. Core funding provided through the National Landcare Program was allocated to one

active project, and despite heavy involvement in establishing a regional Natural Resource Management process in the South-West as part of the South-West Catchment's Council, funding was inadequate for several years.

The BBG is still community managed, and has strong community representation, and Linda Raynor noted that 'we still get very good attendance – this month we had our 146th meeting, there are not too many groups that can say they have met every month for 14 years! The commitment from the community to BBG and what it stands for is still really strong. That's because we continuously deliver to community. We've put a premium on supporting landholders and getting money spent on the ground.'

In 2003, the BBG developed the widely successful 'BestFarms' environmental management system (EMS), that assists landholders to manage their properties using environmentally sustainable and profitable land use practices and to be recognised for this through a certification process (<http://bestfarms.mysouthwest.com.au/>). The program provides one-on-one support, training workshops, site visits, assistance in developing individual EMS plans, and focuses on highest priority natural resource management (NRM) issues. Linda said that the BestFarms EMS is 'technically rigorous, but broken down into bite sized chunks and presented in a language that landholders understand'.

The BBG are expanding the scope of their BestFarms EMS system nationally and internationally, and already has an expanded regional role, but core business is still in delivering projects in the Blackwood Basin.

'We're still a community group in the end and fiercely proud of it and we still don't operate with any direct support from State government. We still have a community owned and managed approach', said Linda Raynor, Strategic Leader, BBG.

The BBG's strong community focus and support can be somewhat of a challenge, as Linda Raynor explained, 'the institutional framework for Natural Resource Management are not strongly supportive of a community managed approach'. The Zone Action Planning system operates in an imaginative way where funding for elements of Zone Action Plans is achieved through the groups' ground-works programs, and it is only in this way that the BBG can 'still get integrated projects out there on the ground'.



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