

Why adopt a bottom up approach?

By Gib Wettenhall, Chairman, NWF

Most of the Foundation trustees live in the country and bring extensive rural networks as well as relevant expertise. Our goal as country people ourselves is not to remove people from landscapes, but to facilitate them to collaborate and create visions of a future where they begin to live more sustainably within those landscapes. We start from the premise that before you can connect landscapes, first you have to connect the people, bringing them together to imagine a different future.

For too long biodiversity conservation initiatives have been applied 'vegemite thin,' dabbed here and there across the landscape. As environmental challenges mount, such a limited and piecemeal approach holds only the promise of becoming increasingly ineffectual.

The traditional route followed to 'save the environment' calls for the removal of people and their replacement with reserve or park. But every reserve is part of an ecosystem in constant flux, and no matter how large, is affected by, for instance:

- plant and animal pest species invasion;
- fire, drought and other natural disasters;
- roading, tourists and what neighbours do.

All of these impacts require some form of human management and intervention. Even the 1,000km long Gondwana biolink in southern WA is, in the end, only a fragment, open to attack wherever its neighbours are ignorant, apathetic, let alone openly hostile to its intents.

We believe that we have to move beyond the crude, short term fix of expelling humans from landscapes and move to the next level of creating a cultural shift in human behaviour in not just energy use, but in the unsustainable consumption of resources. Difficult as that route may seem, only then will we ensure our children enjoy a richly biodiverse future.

Before people can build a different future, they have to be able to imagine what it might look like. To achieve this, we believe, a whole of landscape approach has to be adopted, which involves bringing all land managers on board in creating the vision – from those with the smallest lifestyle block through to farmers as well as park and catchment managers. Crucially, we believe that if all stakeholders are to take 'ownership' of the vision for their particular landscape, they must have an equal stake in its creation.

In contrast, landscape restoration projects are generally wholly government or agency funded or driven by city-based ENGOs. This leads to agendas being set from the top down, with the resulting partnership formation being skewed towards domination by the funding bodies, whether DSE, the CMA or the Wilderness Society. Input from landholders and local community groups who actually live within a landscape is often largely missing. Consequently, lack of meaningful engagement with these groups can compromise a whole of landscape approach from the outset – particularly when it is borne in mind that 65% of Victoria is in the hands of private landholders.

While the idea to commence vision building might emanate from the ‘top’, whoever initiates the process has to bring as many stakeholders together right from the very start. And to ensure that big and small are on an equal footing, impartially sourced staff and materials will need to be brought to bear – which is where the Foundation comes in.

This we describe as the ‘bottom up’ approach, one that attempts at the outset to build broad-based partnerships, which are inclusive and innovative, well-resourced and soundly facilitated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we have found a great deal of angst about pursuing the bottom up approach from ENGOs to government agencies.

“It’s too hard, takes too long, is too messy and too expensive,” we hear people say. Under the more traditional ‘top down’ approach, an agency, organisation or small committee of experts devises a landscape restoration plan, then attempts to sell it to the community under the guise of consultation. But while the plan may be brilliantly executed, nothing, at the end of the day, can disguise its essentially elitist origins. Those who live in the landscape are likely to remain uncommitted, unchanged and probably unhappy that they were only consulted after the fact.

What we fund

The bottom up, whole of landscape approach, then, begins with the aim of involving the full spectrum of people and groups who live, work or own land within the bounds of the particular landscape affected. This is a task a community must take on itself, before the Foundation will become involved in providing funding. In building a partnership, the founding group will need to move outside its comfort zone aiming to be inclusive as possible, if it is to be as representative as possible of all those who have a stake in a particular landscape. They could, for instance, start with a public meeting or invite a range of land manager representatives to take part in a forum. That was the formation process followed by Connecting Country, our first large scale landscape restoration project in the Castlemaine shire of Mt Alexander.

Once a representative group is formed they can apply to us for funding. We now have four whole of landscape projects on our books including the Otway Agroforestry Network proposal to initiate a biolink. We acknowledge that involving a large number of partners in creating a vision requires independent staffing and resources to avoid 'burnout' and to ensure that all are equally engaged.

In the first stage, the Foundation provides funds for the whole of landscape restoration project to employ a project worker to facilitate the preparation of their vision for their landscape. Connecting Country brought together over 30 groups, who over a year prepared a biodiversity blueprint, identifying 36 actions for connecting and expanding habitat within their patch. For 13 years, we have funded the wage of Ray Thomas, the coordinator of the Regent Honeyeater Project, which has created almost 1,000ha of habitat across farmland linking the Lurg Hills near Benalla.

Funds have also been provided to map a landscape's status, thereby providing whole of landscape project partners with an eagle's eye view for opportunities for, say, connecting a missing habitat link in a riparian zone or identifying the sources of land degradation. Another means for extending the reach of project partners is peer group mentoring, which the Foundation is particularly interested in trialling with the Otway Agroforestry Network. This is a tool aimed at promoting a cultural shift in the behaviour of landowners, using the well known mantra that farmers learn best from their peers.

In the second stage of preparing a whole of landscape restoration plan, project partners are resourced by the Foundation to prioritise and fully cost their action plans. It should not be left to outsiders to cherry pick from the raft of ideas thrown up in the vision-building phase. Making the hard decisions about priorities is rightly the job of those who live within the affected landscape.

This 2nd stage gives substance to a project's vision. Any funding body – whether government, corporate or philanthropic – expects fully costed breakdowns. And the more inclusive the process in setting priorities, the greater its perceived credibility for funding bodies.

This has certainly proven true for Connecting Country. Last year, Connecting Country succeeding in gaining \$1.4 million over three years from the Federal Government's Caring for Country program. We provided the leverage to start the ball rolling. Now, hopefully, they have the momentum to begin implementing their vision for a more sustainable future.

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