Introducing the Blackwood Basin Group

Summary

The Blackwood Basin Group is a community operated organisation that delivers assistance to achieve sustainable land management across the Blackwood Basin.

The Group specialises in accelerating on-ground action through coordination of natural resource management and education.

As the peak body for coordinating and delivering natural resource management in the Blackwood, our practices have also been identified as an excellent model of national standard. The Natural Heritage Trust Mid Term Review identified that:
'*The Blackwood Basin Group has developed into a professional organisation with good links to the community and agencies. It can be considered as a key vehicle for Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) delivery in the future'* and recommends that ...*'the NHT should re-commit its support of the Blackwood Basin Group and designate it as a key agent for delivering environmental repair/management in the Blackwood region, along with the state agencies of AgWEST, WRC and CALM'.*

Background

The Blackwood River Basin covers 2.35 million hectares from its headwaters in the wheatbelt to its river mouth in Augusta. It is the largest river catchment in the south west of Western Australia with a river stretching over 300 kilometres. Average annual rainfall ranges from 375 millimetres in the upper catchment at Dumbleyung, to 700 millimetres at Boyup Brook, to over 1000 millimetres at Augusta.

The Basin is home to 40,000 people. The Blackwood Basin Group provides services to and draws support from over 2000 farming businesses, 150 catchment groups, 17 active Land Conservation District Committees, 19 local government authorities and a range of conservation and interest groups. The Basin's agriculture, forestry, mining and tourism industries contribute $550 million each year to Western Australia'' economy. Over 1.6 million hectares of the Basin's 2.8 million hectares or, 60 percent of the land, is dedicated to some form of agricultural production.

The Blackwood Catchment Coordinating Group formed as a peak body for the existing landcare groups in 1992, as a result of community concern regarding declining water quality in the Blackwood River.

The group's first "Regional Initiative" (1995 –1999), funded for $2.5 million by the National Landcare Program, commenced in 1995. This focused on developing decision making tools, collating information, establishing best practice demonstration sites and providing landcare grants to landholders in the basin. The Community Partnership Grants program involved over 300 landholders and funded 1630 ha of remnant vegetation, 1195 ha of revegetation and 750 km of protective fencing. It stimulated $1,431,748 of private investment for the $604,157 grants funding, resulting in a community: public funds ratio of 3.4 : 1.

The Group changed its name to the Blackwood Basin Group (BBG) in 1998 to more clearly reflect the geographical area it covers. The group's second regional initiative, Securing the Future (1999–2002), funded by the Natural Heritage Trust for $5.3 million, commenced in

January 1999. This focuses on accelerating effective onground action in the basin through strategic targeting of resources, primarily through "zone action planning", which involves developing 10-20 year plans for natural resource management initially in four of the nine zones of the Basin.

The Organisation and its Resources

As an organisation, the Blackwood Basin Group has

- ten years experience in catchment planning;
- International recognition as a leader in river restoration and management. The Blackwood Basin Group was the recipient of the 2001 $100,000 Thiess International River Prize. This has resulted in the establishment of the Blackwood River Foundation to promote excellence in waterways and catchment management.
- significant experience and talent within its group members and staff; and
- the capability to embrace new roles.

Community members

The membership of the Blackwood Basin Group includes four Shire and four Land Conservation District Committee representatives, one WA Farmers' Federation, one Industry (WA Plantation Resources), one conservation group and one general community representative. Amongst the membership there is over 150 years of related experience with around 60 years experience in catchment management. This includes all aspects of farming, new industries, nature conservation, community consultation, market research, policy development, staff management, strategy development, local knowledge, community planning, meeting procedures, local government, tourism, forestry, communications, environmental restoration and environmental monitoring. Agriculture WA, Water and Rivers Commission and Conservation and Land Management are also represented on the membership of the Blackwood Basin Group.

Staff

The Blackwood Basin Group staff team comprises eight professionals (Program Manager, Executive Officer, Communications Coordinator, Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, On-ground Support Officer, Biodiversity Program Manager, Spatial Information Officer). This team offers over 50 years of natural resource management related experience including: development and implementation of broadscale on-ground action programs, land rehabilitation, hydrology, environmental monitoring, project management, extension, human resource management, financial management, environmental economics, developing decision making tools, public consultation, journalism, administration, communications, community development and strategy development. Zone managers/coordinators in four of the nine landcare zones are also funded under the Blackwood Basin Group regional initiative program.

Information Technology

The Blackwood Basin Group has regular fortnightly contact with over 150 people who approximate the Blackwood Basin landcare network. Information on our network of contacts is stored in a database and includes a range of community, industry and government links. Spatial Information is networked with Agriculture WA and processed using Microstation and Geomedia software. Three GIS stations located in the Basin, which have map production capability are accessible to community members. The Blackwood Basin Group has a website www.bbg.asn.au

Community profile

The Blackwood Basin Group has a well-established profile in the landcare community. An attitudinal survey conducted in 1998 showed that 70% of respondents knew of the Blackwood Basin Group and 67% of respondents knew the location of the basin boundaries. Of the respondents, 62% had an understanding of how landcare funds have been spent in the basin. The group has established itself as a capable distributor of landcare funding and resources with 65% of survey respondents believing that the groups such as the Blackwood Basin group and Land Conservation District Committees were the most appropriate bodies to administer landcare funding.

Support

Approximately 1600 people have been directly involved in the Securing the Future initiative. We have received funding of $5.3m from The Natural Heritage Trust for our current regional initiative, "Securing the Future" (1998-2002). Approximately 76% of this will fund on-ground activities. State government support includes Agriculture WA part funding for the Executive Officer and technical and strategic support from AGWEST, WRC and CALM. We have also received support of $53,000 from the Commonwealth Department of Regional Services and Transport to address economic sustainability issues within the context of sustainable agriculture. Corporate sponsorship has also contributed to a number of projects in the Blackwood Basin.

Of the total funding for the 'Securing the Future' project 52% is sourced from the community, 12% from state funds, 35% from NHT and the balance is made up of industry support for specific projects.

Blackwood Basin Group comments on Draft State Sustainability Strategy (Sustainability, Natural Resources Management and Biological Diversity)

How can farmers and pastoralists adopt their management practices to conserve soil, save native vegetation, reduce chemical problems and create more diversity in production? What does the future hold for our agricultural landscapes?

The Blackwood Basin Group is in the process of implementing Zone Management Systems throughout the Blackwood Basin. Nine zones have been created within the basin and each individual zone represents an area of land with similar biological, physical and social features sharing common landcare issues. Zone Action Plans are being developed for each new zone, just as catchment plans are designed for a catchment by a catchment group, a community run Zone Management Committee will set goals, conduct a cost/benefit analysis and implement an Action Plan.
Zones within the Blackwood Basin will help with landcare in the following way;

- The new Zone Management System will bring people together who face similar landcare issues, enabling them to unite in identifying solutions.
- Due to the common biophysical features of each zone, landcare funds can be targeted where they are most needed
- Lessons learnt in one area or catchment of a zone can be communicated to other areas with similar issues within the zone
- The community will be able to take responsibility and set their own landcare priorities
- Data on the biophysical nature of each zone can be applied in a readily useable form
- Each zone has an exit water point to help monitoring and evaluation

The Blackwood Basin Group is also currently investigating the establishment of an EMS (Environmental Management System) Pilot Project for the Blackwood Basin Region.
The establishment of an EMS in the Basin will give participant landowners access to a management tool and resources that will demonstrably improve land management processes and land management practices. It will also provide participants with access to a unique brand and better commercial outcomes through participation in the scheme as well as a mechanism to encourage links between Blackwood Basin Group objectives and farm management practices (Pracsys –EMS strategic outline, phase 1 report, March 2002).
At the Environmental Management Systems in Agriculture Conference in Ballina, NSW in November 2001 a number of issues were flagged and some of these included:

- Economic growth and environmental sustainability must be balanced with a greater emphasis placed on consumer recognition of the effort made to conserve resources.
- The identification that ISO 14000 is an appropriate standard to apply to an on-farm EMS, but a voluntary and multi-level approach to EMS development is most likely to succeed on farm.
- Market benefits for the development of EMS exist but need to be quantified and promoted.
- EMS systems should have higher environmental management standards than legislation provides, which opens up self-regulation possibilities.
- EMS can and should be integrated with all other on-farm management systems (eg. OH&S, food safety, quality, etc)
- Widespread adoption of EMS at the catchment level is one method that will allow meaningful measurement of the environmental improvement.

How can we better manage land? What is the role of technologies in areas such as satellite imagery, communications technology and data storage? How can the public gain better access to these new tools for land management?

The Blackwood Basin Group is currently providing access to GIS technology for all landcare coordinators within the Basin. This provides up to date information specifically related to different sub –regions, which will enable informed decisions on natural resource management to be made at the local level. This type of information may be able to be accessed in the near future through the established state Telecentre network of over 90 Telecentres, of which, over twelve are located in the Blackwood Basin Region. The use of established infrastructure to deliver these new tools to the public should be utilised fully to prevent duplication and additional costs.

Up to one third of the Wheatbelt could be lost to salinity. Hundreds of rare and endangered plants and animals could be lost as well as destruction of small Wheatbelt towns already under depopulation pressure. Can we reverse this process and simultaneously create new economic opportunities and revived communities in the wheatbelt? Can regional towns be a focus for sustainable industries that help solve this problem?

Through the application of the Zone Action Planning process, which incorporates fencing of remnants and waterways and implementing high water use farming, the Blackwood Basin Group is making a positive contribution to addressing salinity issues in the wheatbelt. The Oil Mallee project in the wheatbelt is also having a significant effect on salinity through the planting of high water use Eucalyptus species and with the added benefit of establishing a new sustainable industry in the upper reaches of the Blackwood Basin.

While these projects are having a positive effect on landcare in the wheatbelt the effects of desertification due to unsustainable landuse practices are being felt on a global scale. Without continued research, onground work and innovative ideas the wheatbelt will eventually suffer this same fate. The results of desertification include the emergence of ecological refugees. These refugees consist of people from rural communities who have been displaced by the destruction of their local environment. They are forced to move to the city to find employment, but will ultimately not be able to achieve this goal. This increase in displaced individuals will result in the government of the day focusing on humanitarian aid and not the sustainable development and innovative opportunities which are needed to break the cycle of intragenerational inequity (the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer).

Greater emphasis and input from all levels of the community, government and industry needs to be implemented to identify the new emerging industries and projects required torevive and sustain communities in the wheatbelt.

Solar energy is an under utilised resource in need of innovative ideas to convert to practical application. The wheatbelt has access to copious quantities of solar energy and a suggestion could be to develop a clean 'energy' industry from this resource to replace fossil fuels now.

How can we protect our natural heritage and biodiversity while using our rich biological resources to develop new sustainable industries?

The Oil Mallee Industry is leading the way in utilising some of the wheatbelts Eucalyptus species to develop a new sustainable industry which will provide resources for creating electricity, reducing salinity, producing natural oils and has the potential to rebuild communities within the wheatbelt.

To protect our natural heritage and biodiversity the Blackwood Basin Group through it monitoring and evaluation program is collating and evaluating valuable information relating to natural resource management issues in the basin. This information in conjunction with other data sources (i.e. Ag WA, CALM, W&RC) will provide a valuable tool to assist in protecting our natural heritage and biodiversity.

The Blackwood Basin Groups monitoring and evaluation program in conjunction with the proposed EMS project can provide baseline information to assist in the development of new sustainable industries for the area.

The importance of exchange of data between agencies, non-government organisations and the community can not be over emphasised. Too many times there has been duplication in projects due to lack of knowledge of another projects existence. Effective communication is the key to identifying NRM areas, which require further data collection and interpretation to assist in protecting these resources.

The south west of Western Australia is one of the world's 25 'hot spots' for biodiversity. Increasing global attention is being directed to our attempts to save forests, create habitat for rare and endangered species, manage feral animals and weeds. Can this become a new economic opportunity for the State? How can this help communities in rural areas?

The Blackwood Basin Group works closely with landowners through its onground programs to protect the biodiversity of remnant bush in the basin. This is achieved through onground funding for fencing of remnants, direct seeding and replanting of vegetation as well as covenanting of areas of bushland located on private property. The Blackwood Biodiversity Program has identified and prioritised the top 1000 remnant vegetation sites in the Blackwood Basin and uses this information to identify projects, which will be of most benefit to the area.

The use of marketing tools to promote the importance of biodiversity and give it an easy to recognise value is required to engage people who do not already have an understanding of this concept. Once this awareness has been raised then marketing of products associated with biodiversity 'hot spots', i.e. regional branding can take place. The types of products to be marketed could include organic foods and chemical free crops which have been grown in a sustainable way with minimal impact on the biodiversity 'hot spot' located nearby.

Other ideas for economic opportunity could include a greater development of the ecotourism market and an increase in promotion of lifestyle holidays i.e. farm stays etc.

Comment summary

The successful implementation of a State Strategy for Sustainability lies initially with the State Government. Clear direction and leadership is required to instil confidence in the community to be pro-active, accept change and understand the links between social, economic and environmental goals. To effectively achieve sustainability people need to think differently about how they manage their land. Partly as a result of the Blackwood Basin Groups innovative programs this mind shift is already happening within communities of the Blackwood Basin.

Multi-national, large commercial operations and government agencies should not be exempt from implementing the necessary changes to their operations to meet the requirements of the state strategy. The strategy should not be that generic as to be too open to interpretation, giving potential harmful industries the manoeuvrability to implement practices which are detrimental to the environment.

Reiteration of the concept that 'individually we can make a difference' should underpin awareness raising programs initiated by the State Sustainability Strategy.

The Blackwood Basin Group would like to continue to have input into the State Sustainability Strategy. Please include our contact details on your mailing list to ensure that we are kept up to date on the progress of the document and also to enable us to have input into the final document.

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