

Linking Waterway Rehabilitation Programs To Community Development: Green Corps projects on the south coast of Western Australia

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SUMMARY: Waterway rehabilitation programs can be designed to support broader social and educational objectives. This paper reviews environmental youth employment programs carried out by the WA based *Green Skills* group on the south coast of Western Australia. Examples are provided on how the Green Corps youth program in particular has made a successful contribution to waterway repair projects on the south coast. This program has also helped develop environmental skills and positive attitudes in young people. At the policy level, it is advocated that Governments and local communities expand their commitment to such youth environmental and employment projects.

- On the South Coast of Western Australia, Green Corps, a Youth Environmental Program, has assisted in implementing many waterway repair projects.
- Examples of work carried out by Green Corps teams, coordinated through *Green Skills*, include riparian revegetation, seed collecting, fencing, and river walk trails.
- Green Corps programs provide links between waterway management and broader social objectives.
- Governments and local communities across Australia should expand their commitment to youth environment and employment programs.

1. Introduction

Rural Australia is at a social and environmental crossroads. The scale of land and waterways degradation is huge, economic conditions are harsh, and many rural communities are experiencing population decline. River repair policies need to take account of these diverse aspects of the rural crisis to be effective.

While many landholders are enthusiastically adopting new land and watercare management practices, many other are not. Long term strategies to address the underlying causes need to include education and social programs that provide opportunities for young people.

Rural policies need to address inappropriate attitudes and behaviours where these are a major hindrance to the introduction of sound water and landcare practices. These policies thus should cover not only land and stream management issues, but also how to build stronger rural communities through greater participation of women in decision making, adoption of occupational health and safety programs on farms, and education and training for younger people, especially 15-25 years old.

How can new land and water care policies bring about more caring attitudes amongst rural landholders? One necessary component of these policies concerns youth employment and education, as it is in the crucial early years that attitudes are forged. This paper looks at the linkages between the Green Corps program and riparian management on the south coast of Western Australia.

1.1 The South Coast

The south coast of Western Australia is a diverse rural area with waterways and wetlands that range from deeply channelled, annually discharging rivers to internally drained wetlands and lakes and ephemeral, naturally saline creek systems.

Large scale clearing has led to the degradation of waterways through increased salinity, erosion, sedimentation, and eutrophication.

Landcare projects involving riparian management entail costly, labour intensive contributions from farmers. This is still the case even where there is assistance through grants to cover the costs of fencing and other resources.

Labour availability is often the deciding factor for a farmer to undertake a project. Many farmers put off landcare projects because they do not have the time available to complete the job. Provision of labour through youth training programs has been one contribution that assists with fencing, tree planting, and other revegetation works.

2. Green Skills

Green Skills is a non profit community group working on landcare and environmental projects and provision of environmental training across Western Australia's south coast region and in many other locations in the state.

It has been closely associated with south coast catchment and riparian repair projects since 1990. It has also helped to pioneer the use of youth environmental programs linked to landcare and riparian management. These include the LEAP (Local Environment Action Programs, New Work Opportunities) and more recently, Green Corps.

Since 1996, Green Skills has worked hard to have access to Green Corps projects for the south coast region to assist with a number of catchment repair programs.

The Green Corps projects involve teams of 10 young people between the ages of 17 and 20 who apply voluntarily to be involved in environmental and heritage projects for six months full time.

Green Skills is responsible for:

- putting together worthwhile projects with community groups and agencies which will be supported by the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers, who manage the Green Corps program across Australia, and with the final selection by the federal government selection committee,
- employing and supervising the full time team leader responsible for each team of ten young people,
- delivering the formal training to the team members, and
- ensuring that the projects undertaken are completed to a high standard.

Green Skills has completed six Green Corps projects on the south coast and is currently managing one project and has further projects being assessed for funding.

Projects completed On South Coast :

- West Cape Howe Bibbulmun Track Project May - November 1997
- South Coast Estuaries Project May - November 1997
- South Coast Remnant Vegetation Corridor and Wetlands Project September 1997 - March 1998
- Oyster Harbour Project 1 December 1997 - May 1998
- Wilson Inlet Project April 1998 - October 1998
- Albany Hinterland Project (June - December 1998)

In each case the projects were developed with community groups and agencies to address major issues raised in the landcare strategy *Southern Prospects: a strategy for managing natural resources and developing rural communities on the South coast of Western Australia*.

The issues identified included social, economic and environmental concerns. Green Skills works simultaneously on priority environmental issues such as waterways repair at the same time as addressing the need to keep and attract younger people in the south coast region by appropriate training and employment creation to revitalise rural communities.

2.1 Management Issues

The Green Corps project has proved to be a successful one in attracting enthusiastic young people to be involved in on the ground projects.

Green Skills experienced some difficulties with the first project undertaken due to the quality of the participants chosen in the first team. Due to the limited lead up time to the start date of the project and a lack of state wide advertising of the project, there were insufficient applicants to be able to choose a good group of young people. After the most problematic members of the team were required to leave the situation improved.

Since that time we have only received positive feedback about the involvement of Green Corps teams in projects.

The team leaders and young people involved have been highly motivated and enthusiastic.

Green Skills is an accredited training provider and has been able to organise the formal training for its own Green Corps teams as well as for other Green Corps teams which has helped training to be integrated into the on the ground projects.

Environmental outcomes are the priority for Green Corps programs, with employment outcomes for participants an added bonus. Training is therefore directed at environmental issues related to the major project the team will work on, to ensure each participant has an understanding of the processes involved in the environment they are working in. This provides an excellent background for participants to pursue employment or additional training interests, and ensures a each team member understands exactly why they are doing the work, and how it will contribute to repairing the environment they are working in.

2.2 Outcomes for young people

There are many positive outcomes for young people who complete the Green Corps environmental employment programs.

On a personal level, they gain self esteem, respect and confidence through the responsibility that they take on as part of the team environment. They bond closely with other team members and their team leader, and learn tolerance in dealing with others. Communication skills are enhanced, and project outcomes provide satisfaction and a sense of achievement. They tend to mature over the course of the project.

Professional qualities are also enhanced. Certification in workplace Occupational Health and Safety, and Senior First Aid is provided through formal training. Opportunities often exist to complete power tool and chainsaw safety courses. Environmental training in areas such as Environmental Audit and Vegetation Restoration Techniques complements job knowledge that is required, and is recognised at Technical College level should the participant wish to pursue further study through TAFE.

They gain an appreciation of environmental issues that affects the way they look at the world, and the way they behave. The contact and exposure to the rural community through working with farmers and landcare groups allows them to appreciate the issues that these communities must deal with.

The commitment of turning up regularly at set times for work, trains them into the real life workplace situation, and exposure to professionals working in the field enables them to establish valuable networks for future contacts.

3. Conclusion

Green Corps programs on the south coast of Western Australia have made a valuable contribution to stream and river conservation projects. Green Corps teams have provide the labour to complete a wide range of on the ground projects that can now provide examples and models for others to follow. Clearly other communities around Australia can also take advantage of the opportunities provided by environmental programs to assist with their land and watercare projects.

These programs have also had education benefits for the young participants themselves. Involving young people in a regular team environment has clear benefits for promoting personal development. The familiarity gained with close association with a group of peers builds confidence and teaches tolerance and respect, which helps the person mature. This combines with exposure to a workplace situation ensures the participants will be a valuable addition to the full time work force.

When the training workplace is based upon landcare and working 'oudoors' in the environment, most outcomes are positive for the team responsible. The benefits to the teams extends further than just the outcomes achieved, however. Awareness of the natural processes that are involved with the project site, sense of achievement and satisfaction in being involved with a team, and goodwill received from assisting farmers or community groups are all spin offs that the team can gain immensely from.

It has been valuable to link youth employment and training programs with waterways and landcare repair projects. A generation of young environmental leaders are being cultivated through the Green Corps program. It is hoped that this will contribute to changing attitudes within rural Australia, and contribute to the conditions where riparian management and repair will be more widely adopted at the local district level. At a Federal and State policy level, there certainly would be major benefits if these programs were expanded to be available to a greater proportion of young people. River repair programs would benefit if governments and local communities across Australia expanded their commitment to youth environment and employment programs.

Reference

Agriculture Western Australia (1996) "Southern Prospects: A Strategy for managing natural resources and developing communities on the south coast of Western Australia. Prepared by the South Coast Regional Assessment Panel and the South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team. Albany WA.

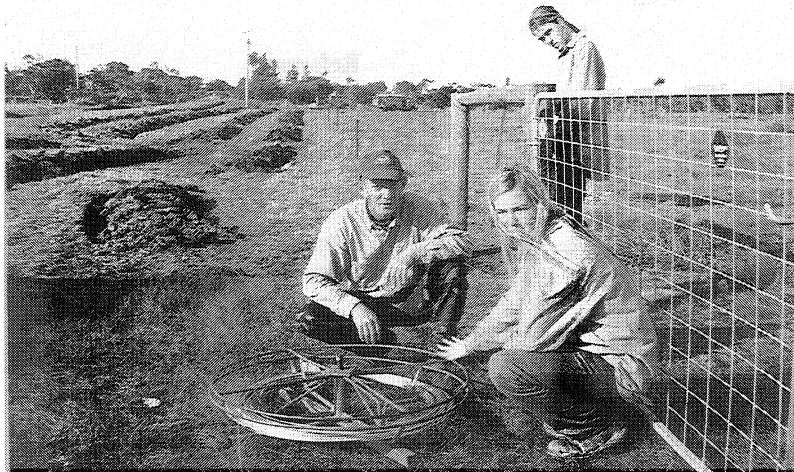


Figure 1: A Green Corps team members beside a fence and tree planting site beside a drain forming part of a 'streamlining' demonstration site in the Cuppup catchment near Albany, WA. This project was co-ordinated by Green Skills in cooperation with the local farmer, landcare group and Wilson Inlet Management Authority.



Figure 2: Young people on a Green Skills youth environmental employment (LEAP) program planting native trees beside the Little River, near Denmark, 1994.



Figure 3: The same riparian site in 1997, showing successful revegetation. This demonstration site is readily visible from a major highway.