

Community Involvement In Stream Rehabilitation

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SUMMARY: The New South Wales Department of Land and Water Conservation, for the last five years, has attempted to involve the community in all stream rehabilitation works. This involvement has included the: stream assessment; stream management plans; planting trees and construction of erosion control structures.

The community involvement, especially in the form of Landcare Groups, is essential in any river rehabilitation as it is usually the community that owns the land adjacent to the stream. Encouraging the community to own the problem is essential to any future management of the streams, or erosion control works that are undertaken within the streams to ensure the long term maintenance of these works.

The best way to achieve this involvement is to educate the community about the value of their streams and what they can do to manage them better. Education is the most essential phase in any project involving the community, otherwise there can be some resentment towards government officials and a lack of ownership of the project. To assist managers some hints for working with community groups in stream rehabilitation projects have been outlined in this paper to assist stream managers in involving the community and giving ownership of the project to the community.

The Department of Land and Water Conservation will continue this association with the community in stream rehabilitation and management and encourages other departments and agencies to involve the community in any stream rehabilitation projects and management issues within their catchment.

THE MAIN POINTS OF THIS PAPER

- It is essential to involve the community, not only in the planning phase, but also in the works phase of a project.
- Our ultimate goal should be to allow groups to undertake the planning and works on their own initiative.
- Education is essential and the best way to initiate community involvement in any stream rehabilitation project.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to involve the community in stream rehabilitation and management is something that all natural resource managers should address. Community involvement in a project, not just the planning phase, gives them ownership of that project. Community ownership of any project is essential for its long term success.

The involvement of every member of the community is also essential in order to maximise the effectiveness and guarantee the overall success of any project. However, use of the community as just a cheap labour source is something that the community will very easily recognise. This will lead to mistrust and make any community involvement at a later date very difficult to arrange. This involvement ethic should also be adopted by the government department representatives that are working with the community groups.

Community involvement in river rehabilitation also leads to environmental awareness of the community and a sense of achievement by agency staff involved with the community.

2. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN STREAM REHABILITATION

2.1. Project Ownership - Whose Project Is It?

In New South Wales the majority of land adjoining river systems is privately owned. Therefore it is essential to involve the community in any stream rehabilitation project. Legislation could force the landholders to do the work on behalf of the community. However this could lead to antagonism towards officialdom and possibly a "locked gate policy" similar to that enacted by the New South Wales Farmers Association towards state government Water and Vegetation reforms. Government departments and strategic planning could force the landholders to allow government departments onto their property to do the work on behalf of the community. At the first sign of a problem with the project, such as minor damage after a flood, the landholders will be approaching the departments to get them to 'come back out and fix their problem'.

Working this way is probably achievable, however there must be an understanding by everyone involved of the enormous financial costs and human resources required by the departments involved and the unsympathetic attitude towards the works by the landholders.

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This situation also has other drawbacks. It can lead to a “handout mentality” in the community as well as an attitude that “what we do doesn’t matter because the government will come along and fix it”.

By involving the community in the project and giving them ownership a “feel good” attitude is adopted by everyone involved. The community get the opportunity to work together, something that is disappearing from modern society, and the government departments get the positive publicity of working with the community. Also any maintenance or follow up work that is required in the project will usually be undertaken by the community. This will reduce the pressure on departmental staff and the financial burden on departmental budgets.

Once a project becomes a “community” based project rather than a government project, a number of different doors usually open, giving access to resources which

The other reason is twofold. The first is that each community group will have its own hierarchical structure which can provide supervision. Also, by assuming that we are above the community leader could cause conflict between ourselves and the group and even within the group. The second is that if we actually do supervise the work then legally we have responsibility for the safety of the people involved in the project. Departmental OH&S Co-ordinators usually cringe when they see people working so closely with heavy machinery.

It is also essential that everyone within the group have the possibility of being involved in the project, from children and diminutive wives to big burly husbands. This again reinforces the community ownership of the project. The building of “sausage gabions” is an ideal activity for involving everyone in the group (Figure 1). Everyone can be involved in either planting of



Figure 1: Be sure to assign activities to people suited to the situation. Nobody likes work that is too hard (Starr et al. 1997)

would otherwise have added considerable expense to the final cost. These resources include local labour, new or used materials, advertising in all forms of media, sponsorship and advice (Pengelly, 1997).

2.2. Get Involved and Involve Everyone.

Not only is it essential that government departments involve the community in any projects along streams, but it is essential that those same government officers involve themselves in the physical labour as well. This is for two main reasons. The first reason is that if we don’t get involved, and stand on top of the bank and watch the group undertake the work, it can be perceived that we are supervising and overseeing the works. We would be in fact taking ownership of the project away from the community group.

vegetation, tying off the gabions and levering the ends together. Be sure that tasks are apportioned to people to suit their physical capabilities. Activities that are too strenuous have the potential to discourage people from being involved.

It is also a good idea to have the group organise the working day as a social event with morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea, and especially after job “celebrations”. This reinforces that it is a community project. It also allows the participation by members of the group that may not be able or willing to do the actual works (Starr, 1995).

If the project involves heavy machinery work, plan to have this part of the project completed before the group working day so that the group is not standing around waiting to start work. People arrive full of enthusiasm for the project, but this will rapidly disappear if they are forced to wait to start work. It is also advisable that some of the works be started before the group arrives. This allows the group to see what they are trying to achieve.

Government officers should not hesitate to actually “get in there and give it a go”. It is better to make a mistake and learn from it. This will not only earn the respect of the group but it will also allow you to learn other skills which you can pass on to different groups.

Most importantly all members of the group should understand the purpose of the works and how they are designed to function. Education before the working day is the ideal method for informing the group. If this is unrealistic, a handout and briefing, and even drawings on an information board on the day will achieve the same result. If workers are not briefed they may see themselves simply as cheap labour (Starr, 1995).

2.3. Education

The most important thing that we can do with any project is to educate the community about their streams. But it is also important that we don't assume that we know more than the landholders who have lived their entire life next to their stream. Listening to their ideas and thoughts and giving them proper credence again adds to the belief of community ownership and a better understanding of the processes within their streams.

It is also our role to ensure that current and correct technical information is passed on to the community group in a format that they can understand. If this information is in a highly technical form the group may not understand the information. This will generate frustration rather than results. This is the easiest possible way to lose interest and credibility with a community group.

Follow up education after the completion of the project is also necessary. Some people see minor erosion at a work site as a ‘failure’. The best way to educate them in this respect is to ask them, “what would have occurred if the works were not in place”? So it is essential that some contact with the group be maintained, but this contact should be minimal and should gradually decrease as experience and confidence increases.

The best way to involve the community in any stream rehabilitation is to give as much responsibility for the project over to them. After completing a few projects with a group it could even be advisable to “stand back” and let the group undertake a project on their own. They will come to you to ask any questions if problems arise. What better way to give a project community ownership!

3. CONCLUSION

As the majority of land along streams is privately owned it is essential that the community be involved in any stream rehabilitation or management project. It is also essential that this involvement is not just window dressing, as this will also deter the community from becoming involved. It will take time, communication, a good repour, trust and a few successful projects before each community will gather momentum to become relatively self-sufficient (Pengelly, 1997).

This self-sufficiency should be the ultimate goal of any government officer working with community groups and stream rehabilitation. This is achievable in the long term through an education program used in conjunction with any projects undertaken by community groups.

4. REFERENCES

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