

Supporting and connecting community through restoration - Why the Rivers of Carbon model works for Landcare (51653)

Mary Bonet ¹

1. *LachLandcare Inc- Rivers of Carbon, Goulburn, NSW, 2580, Australia.*
goulburnyass@lachlandcare.org.au:

Key Points

- Partnerships for successful riparian restoration efforts
- Valuing people and knowledge
- Creating awareness of what a 'healthy river' is, and inspiring people to act
- Building landholder and community inspiration and commitment to waterway management

Abstract

So, you want to restore your local waterway? Well, the chances are that it is going to involve getting a group of private landholders with diverse views, farming enterprises and motivations to work alongside each other. Not only will you be expecting them to forego some of their land, but you will also be asking for co-investment through fencing, alternative water, planting trees and managing weeds. You may also be asking them to change their management practices, and even their beliefs about what a 'healthy river' is. You also need to be able to build landholder and community inspiration and commitment for managing their waterway for the long-term.

So how do we go about doing this? Rivers of Carbon is a successful riparian restoration program operating in the Southern Tablelands region of NSW. It brings together Landcarers, scientists, regional government and non-government groups, to deliver integrated on-ground actions focused on maintaining, restoring and reconnecting our precious riparian areas. What makes Rivers of Carbon different from conventional models, is that it plays to the strengths of each of the stakeholder groups involved, enabling them to focus their efforts on what they enjoy and feel good about. This approach empowers people to act and works well with Landcare groups who are keen to do something practical, rather than filling in forms and overseeing others.

Using a storytelling approach, this presentation will talk about the keys to establishing these effective collaborations and show how they inspire landholder action and long-term commitment. Tips and advice will also be shared so that the model can be used elsewhere.

Keywords

Landcare; Landholder engagement; Collaboration, On-ground action

Introduction

So, you want to restore your local waterway? Well, the chances are that it is going to involve getting a group of private landholders with diverse views, farming enterprises and motivations to

work alongside each other. Not only will you be expecting them to forego some of their land, but you will also be asking for co-investment through fencing, alternative water, planting trees and managing weeds. You may also be asking them to change their management practices, and even their beliefs about what is a 'healthy river'. You also need to be able to build landholder and community inspiration and commitment for managing their waterway for the long-term.

So how do we go about doing this? Rivers of Carbon is a successful riparian restoration program operating in the Southern Tablelands region of NSW. It brings together Landcarers, scientists, regional government and non-government groups, to deliver integrated on-ground actions focused on maintaining, restoring and reconnecting our precious riparian areas. What makes Rivers of Carbon different from conventional models, is that it plays to the strengths of each of the stakeholder groups involved, enabling them to focus their efforts on what they enjoy and feel good about. This approach empowers people to act and works well with Landcare groups who are keen to do something practical, rather than filling in forms and overseeing others.

Landcare

Landcare is a well-recognised and respected volunteer grassroots movement that harnesses both individuals and groups to protect, restore and sustainably manage Australia's natural environment and its productivity. It was established in 1989, nearly 30 years ago, when a group of farming neighbours in Victoria recognised that they could be more effective if they addressed common natural resource management concerns together.

Landcare quickly became a national movement, with the historic alliance of the National Farmers Federation's Nick Farley, the Australian Conservation Foundation's Philip Toyne, and the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, championing the 80's as the 'decade of Landcare'. The rhetoric was supported with a large monetary investment into a National Landcare Program that has inspired and engaged landholders, and resulted in projects across Australia. There are now thousands of Landcare groups all based on this simple idea: people organising to come together to discuss shared land management issues, and to design and implement practical solutions to address them.

Challenges

In NSW alone, there are over 3000 Landcare groups, with around 45,000 members supported by 60 part-time coordinators through the NSW Landcare Coordinator Initiative. This equates to a lot of volunteers, keen to do great work, but with very little professional support. Many of the rural groups are based around a local creek or catchment, and protecting and restoring the riparian areas is one of their key issues.

One challenge for Landcare groups is finding the time and money to secure funding for on-ground activities. Funding for Landcare groups in NSW is limited, with a couple of key grant programs that are hotly contested. Completing a grant application process with limited professional support is hard, as the grants require detailed mapping, governance arrangements, communication, monitoring and evaluation capabilities which are not always available to Landcare groups. Getting a successful riparian project up and running is not always easy. Most of our degraded rivers, creeks and ponds run through private land. A successful project requires many different landholders to work together, with people often having differing views about what a 'healthy river' is.

Landcare and Rivers of Carbon

Rivers of Carbon is managed by Siwan Lovett and Lori Gould, two NRM practitioners and communicators who wanted to run a program that harnesses and builds on the strengths of all involved. The Program provides a range of resources, workshops and guidelines that encourage people to learn and discuss what may or may not make a 'healthy river'. The common-sense approach taken by Rivers of Carbon to sharing knowledge about riparian restoration was what initially attracted Landcare to the Program. For example, Rivers of Carbon talks about healthy river systems as being 'messy and complex' yet our management practices have encouraged landowners to be 'neat' which results in 'simple', unhealthy rivers that cannot perform all the functions we need them to. This easy to understand concept of 'messaging things up' has resonated in our southern tableland communities and resulted in a film, workshop and the most downloaded article in the Landcare magazine for 2017. (<http://riversofcarbon.org.au/rivers-of-carbon-goulburn-district-river-linkages/a-great-roc-gig-in-goulburn-focusing-on-why-we-want-to-mess-up-the-riparian-zone/>)

The support for this commonsense approach subsequently developed into an opportunity for Landcare and Rivers of Carbon to work together, with the relationship developing through a successful Australian Government Biodiversity Fund program - Southern Riparian Linkages in 2011, a \$1.9 million investment into the Murrumbidgee catchment for riparian restoration and carbon sequestration. From this initial project another seven projects have been, and are continuing to be, undertaken using the Landcare and Rivers of Carbon partnership approach in the Yass, Burra, Breadalbane, Goulburn and Murrumbidgee region.

Combined strengths

Grant writing, program management, riparian restoration expertise, and communication skills are Rivers of Carbon's defining capabilities. It made sense then for these strengths to be combined with Landcare's local connections. The on-ground delivery part of the Rivers of Carbon model is undertaken by Greening Australia, or organisations such as Conservation Volunteers Australia – trusted, non-government groups that have strong connections in the Southern Tablelands.

Landcare is now integral to the Rivers of Carbon Program, as it is the Landcare group that invites Rivers of Carbon to work with them, rather than the other way around. The invitation is key, as Rivers of Carbon does not go where it is not invited. This is a fundamental principle that underpins the program, as an invitation lays the foundation for a constructive and mutually beneficial conversation. Power is shared, with the strengths of each party acknowledged and respected.

Landcare groups provide the link to landowners, help run information and training days, supply tubestock through their community nurseries, conduct Waterwatch, Frogwatch and bird monitoring activities, as well as community volunteer planting days. Basically the Rivers of Carbon model enables Landcare to get on and do what Landcare does best.

Conclusion

The partnership model has proven to be very successful in the Goulburn, Upper Lachlan, Yass Valley, Boorowa, Cooma, Burra and Upper Murrumbidgee regions. The Rivers of Carbon website provides stories and links to videos demonstrating the work being undertaken and the importance of the partnership approach. Most importantly, Rivers of Carbon enables people to feel empowered within the context of a changing climate with a positive message, with value placed on social (people, networks and relationships) as well as natural capital.

Rivers of Carbon has enabled our Landcare community to fulfill its objectives to protect, restore and enhance our local waterways. By linking Landcare efforts with the backing of science, communications and project management, the Rivers of Carbon approach has inspired many new landholders to become willing partners in riparian restoration. Whilst the Rivers of Carbon model may not be appropriate or available in all Landcare areas, similar collaborative partnership approaches which build on the strengths of each partner can be adopted in other areas and could lead to successful and long-term outcomes for riparian restoration.