



**GOULBURN  
BROKEN**  
CATCHMENT  
MANAGEMENT  
AUTHORITY

# VIBRANT COMMUNITIES – WE CAN DO IT



## ISSUE

In the 1980s the Goulburn Broken catchment was facing significant issues that threatened the health of the natural resources and hence the economy of the whole catchment. Extensive clearing of the catchment for agriculture meant that the general condition of biodiversity was rated as 'poor' and over 100 native vertebrate animals were threatened with extinction. In the lower reaches of the catchment nutrient pollution meant that the water quality in the rivers and streams was also classified as 'poor' or at best 'degraded'. Agriculture, industry and towns now diverted up to 46% of the water out of the rivers and had changed the timing of flows to suit production and not the river environment. Salinity was increasing and was already impacting on 25% of irrigated land costing \$47m per year at 1989 values. A strong culture of development and use of natural resources had driven the decisions that had been made by government and the broader community.

The knowledge and skills in the community also drove development but issues such as water quality, species extinction and salinity were poorly understood. A wide range of private and government organisations operated successfully across the catchment but given the legacy of the past had little experience of working collaboratively to solve catchment-wide issues.

Even with these huge issues, the Goulburn Broken catchment was very fortunate. The people involved in the early days of catchment management recognised that given the complexity of the issues, the enormity of the change needed and that as most of the land was in private hands the '...combined efforts of landholders, the regional community and governments' was needed to tackle the threat. This meant that a collaborative approach was critical. The early leaders also recognised that new knowledge and skills were required so everyone could understand the problems they were facing and collectively develop the solutions that would work. Finally, a 'we-can-do-it' culture was needed if the community was going to persist over time and deal with the difficult decisions ahead where there would inevitably be some winners and some losers.

## INTERVENTIONS

From the start a combined approach that engaged the community and built strong partnerships was developed. The standard set was high and has been maintained.

A Community Education program was established and approximately 4% of the budget used to build the understanding of salinity across a broad audience that included real estate agents, councils, bankers, irrigation designers, children, teachers and landholders. The stark facts were not smoothed over and innovative tools such as the installation of groundwater flags across the region were used so that everyone could learn about the rising levels of groundwater hidden below the surface. Engagement and community participation was strong as shown by the development of the regional drainage strategy where every one of the 23 irrigation drainage committees met multiple times in halls, kitchens and beside the road to discuss and refine the options for drainage. This strong engagement and participation has continued to improve and be modernised with the development of the 2012-2019 Regional Catchment Strategy (RCS) introducing the use of social media to enhance the use of traditional media and over 170 public meetings were attended by an estimated 1,000 people.

Engagement continues beyond increasing awareness and the development of plans. Over 80% of the membership of our community advisory groups is from the community in recognition that it is the community that implements the majority of works that underpin the RCS. The formation, linking and successful operation of landholder and environmental groups such as Landcare has also been facilitated and supported by the CMA to encourage greater input and to assist with implementation.

Engagement is about ensuring all parts of the community have the opportunity to contribute and participate. The catchment is home to over 40 different ethnic groups and continues to be an important region for the settlement of new migrants and refugees – many of whom work in agriculture and become land owners in their own right.

Since the early 1990s the CMA has supported the Ethnic Council of Shepparton to ensure that material, events and programs were accessible to ethnic land holders and that their participation was encouraged. The catchment is also home to a number of Traditional Owner groups many of whom still live on country. The GB CMA has supported Traditional Owners to develop 'Whole of Country Plans' that reflect the values, actions and objectives of the Traditional Owners in relation to caring for country. Building the capacity of the Traditional Owners to be self determining has been a priority with the employment of an indigenous facilitator, establishment of a cadetship program, specific capability building events and ongoing support for natural resource management employment programs.

Volunteers are a critical part of the implementation of the Regional Catchment Strategy. In addition to the hours that farmers put in on their own properties, in the five years from 2010 alone, each year over 4,300 members of the 96 Landcare groups across the catchment volunteered their time to revegetate an average of 485 ha, control weeds on 19,800ha and vermin on 50,700ha of public and private land. The GB CMA staff take volunteering and the community seriously and among other contributions each month support a disadvantaged primary school to build the reading and conversational skills of their largely multicultural children.

Collaboration between government agencies on planning, technical and community advisory groups has been guided by a set of eight partnership principles that were formally documented in the early 2000s and used to evaluate the partnerships. In the early days, a Regional Managers Forum was established aimed at 'developing personal familiarity and co-operation between departments and the individuals within them' and this forum continues to meet today as the Senior Combined Partners Forum. Clear links were made to the State and Federal government decision-making structures and politician and senior bureaucrat tours became a regular part of the calendar. Agency staff are encouraged to stand shoulder to shoulder at public forums with the opportunity to discuss, debate and then integrate the different technical perspectives through specialist technical forums.

From the first annual report, gaps in the community and agency capability were being identified and training recommended in technical issues such as groundwater management and in skills such as group facilitation and meeting procedures. Capability building for GB CMA staff has now formalized into the GB CMAs Capability Framework that describes the required skills against each CMA role. Since 1989, developing technical capability involved more than 15 research reporting days, monthly meetings of cross-discipline technical committees, regular agency and community attendance at national and international conferences, hundreds of field days and bus tours and participation in a wide formal training courses.

Successful community involvement not only involves an understanding of natural resource management but also leadership skills. Since the commencement of the Fairley Leadership program, the GB CMA has funded the participation of one community person and one staff member each year. All Board members are sponsored to attend the Australian Institute of Company Directors and if required, all community chairs are given training and mentoring in meeting procedure.

Performance is tracked with a number of approaches in place with the information used to drive continuous improvement. A set of 10 partnership principles were developed in the 1990s for inclusion in documents such as Memorandum of Understanding with partners and to assess the health of partnership relationships. In recent times a Goulburn Broken Catchment Partnership Agreement (2018) has been formalised with 34 signatories from government agencies and community groups committing to working together for the good of the catchment. The irrigation program invested in research to develop a set of social performance indicators that are used to measure the social impact of the irrigation programs. Since 2010, the GB CMA has also participated in the Organisational Performance Excellence reviews for natural resource management organisations that not only assesses the organisation but also benchmarks it against its peers and other non-government organisations.

## OUTCOMES

The strength of the partnerships that have been formed between the agencies and the community has enabled them to not only rapidly develop programs but to also attract resources and then successfully implement them. This has been demonstrated time and time again.

The emergence from the community of the \$1b Foodbowl Initiative in 2008 built on the leadership, knowledge and partnerships forged through water saving initiatives on-farm and ultimately set the scene for regional irrigation upgrades across Australia. In addition, the partnership approach has also meant that the Federally funded Farm Water Program has been successful from day one with more than \$144 million invested and 72 gigs of water returned to the environment.

Community natural resource management groups now operate in their own right and have been able to directly attract over \$1.6m of funding over the past 5 years to implement a range of projects. In addition a strong private sector has been developed and now provides a wide range of services from the design of whole farm plans, coordinating tree planting teams, technical advice to landholders through to facilitating planning sessions.

Even in the face of the devastating impact that drought was having in the irrigation region of the Goulburn Broken during the early 2000s the region has been able to respond positively. The GB CMA initiated a drought employment program in 2007, involved a number of regional partners and was able to employ 70 drought affected farmers for up to 6 months. The program was so successful that it was expanded across Victoria in 2008 and was then repeated in 2014 to help industry adjust to major cuts to fruit intakes by SPC Ardmona. Almost 50 horticulturalists severely affected by the cut backs were employed on environmental works and participated in over 1,000 hours of accredited training.

Community members have used the skills they developed by being involved in catchment management to contribute broadly in roles such as chair of GMW (John Dainton, Steven Mills), board members of organisations such as SPC and Landcare Australia (John Pettigrew, Angus Howell, Sandy Mackenzie), president of the Goulburn Valley Environment Group (John Pettigrew), mayor and local government members (Pam Robinson, John Gray, Murray McDonald, Mick Williams, Adrian Weston, Kate Stothers), VFF industry representatives (Rien Silverstein, Ailsa Fox), directors of organisations such as Water for Rivers (Peter McCamish) and a wide range of community based leadership roles. GB CMA staff also ensure they use their skills they have developed in the broader community taking on leadership roles in local schools, regional action groups, regional boards and recreation/sports groups.

The 'we-can-do-it' culture is reflected in the catchment community's continual development of new ways of addressing the challenges they face. The catchment was seen as the leader in catchment management and implementation and led to a string of 'firsts'. To name a few - the first community-based Watertable Watch program, the first biodiversity tender program, the first establishment of Landcare Networks, first Local Area Plans developed by the community, the first Ethnic Access program, the first Community Drainage program, the first Victorian Environment Priority project and the first study of catchment ecosystem services leading to international recognition in the field of social-ecological resilience thinking. It is not surprising that the catchment has attracted over 20 National and International awards for its achievements.

As Hans Joehr (former Corporate Head of Agriculture at Nestle) stated in August 2003, he had.. 'been to a lot of countries but I have not seen anything that compares with the way your community is working together to create a sustainable environment'.

## FUTURE CHALLENGES

The foundations of collaboration, building capability and having a positive culture have been built on and put to good use making the catchment community stronger and more able to manage the challenges it has faced. Over a number of years, governments have oscillated between a focus on community-led initiatives to centralised government-led approaches. In addition, not only has the overall amount of government funding coming into the catchment reduced in real terms, funding has shifted away from a catchment-wide approach to focussing on specific, primarily water-based initiatives. These trends have had a number of impacts. Firstly, they have reduced the role for the community in the development of programs and programs are less accountable to the community for their performance. The capacity for organisations such as the GB CMA to invest directly in building the capacity of the community has also reduced although investment to support community groups such as Landcare has remained stable. The new programs require less collaboration between agencies and between the private sector to deliver and the different technical perspectives are less likely to be heard and integrated. The challenge this creates is twofold. The first challenge is to continue to ensure that efficient and effective programs are developed that will actually improve the overall catchment condition and that landholders value and will implement. Finally, the second is about the future and ensuring that there are future generations of skilled community members who are able to identify issues, lead the community and maintain the 'we can do it' culture while building resilience in the face of continual change.