



*"Many hands...one voice"*

# Strengthening community Landcare for healthy ACT landscapes

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## The Landcare ACT Agenda

Landcare ACT, the peak body for land stewardship groups in the ACT, is the voice for about 1500 active landcarers, who work together in more than 60 community groups. Landcare ACT is calling for a new integrated and holistic, landscape-scale approach to land stewardship, to promote effective action, a resilient community and healthy landscapes. Landcare ACT seeks action on the following 7 point agenda.

### Develop an ACT Natural Resource Management Strategy

- cover all natural resources in the ACT and its catchments
- underpin with meaningful community engagement and consultation
- execute through funding for an implementation plan
- report progress annually to provide transparency.

### Develop an ACT agriculture policy

- ensure food and fibre production is a permanent land use close around Canberra for the multiple co-benefits
- position the ACT within the region for a sustainable and productive future
- integrate with the new Natural Resource Management strategy and a food policy.

### Review the ACT's governance framework for natural resources and agriculture

- recognise Landcare ACT as the peak body for the community on Landcare
- improve clarity and transparency in decision-making on natural resources and agricultural matters by government agencies
- establish a fully independent ACT Natural Resource Management regional body that advises government and Ministers, considers community-driven initiatives and government priorities, determines expenditure of Australian government funding, and reports annually.

### **Recognise the importance of Aboriginal knowledge and culture**

- involve Aboriginal people in the development and implementation of the Natural Resource Management strategy
- provide support for Aboriginal people to work on country, particularly at significant cultural sites in the ACT region
- provide additional funding for cultural site assessments preceding natural resource management activities, and for cultural awareness training.

### **Recognise the importance of weed management in ACT landscapes**

- commit to increased and reliable annual funding for ongoing weed management
- ensure rigorous annual reporting on the control and containment of the species that are the greatest biosecurity threats to nature conservation and farming in the ACT.

### **Support community participation in Landcare**

- recognise the important role of Catchment, Parkcare, Landcare and Aboriginal groups
- commit ongoing funding through Catchment groups to ensure the viability of Canberra's local community-based Landcare networks, and
- ensure the long term continuity of the ACT and Region Frogwatch Program.

### **Support education programs**

- integrate the principles of local environmental stewardship, Landcare and Aboriginal culture into ACT education curriculum and programs to ensure healthy ACT landscapes in the future.

## **Background**

### **Who is Landcare ACT?**

Landcare ACT is the peak body for Landcare in the ACT, with a skills-based volunteer Board of Directors, supported by member representatives on Landcare ACT's Members Council. The foundation members are the Ginninderra, Molonglo and Southern ACT Catchment Groups, the Rural Landholders Association and the Buru-Ngunawal Aboriginal Corporation.

The role of Landcare ACT is to support and promote the interests of its member community groups, which maintain and restore the condition of our urban parklands, rural lands, nature reserves and waterways. Landcare ACT is a member body of the National Landcare Network.

### **What are natural resource management and Landcare?**

Natural resources include water, soil, minerals, plants, animals and the land itself. Natural resource management encompasses the management of how people use and interact with the natural resources in their landscapes. It brings together land use planning, water management, conservation biology, and the sustainability of agriculture, forestry and tourism. Good natural resource management recognises that people and their wellbeing and livelihoods rely on the health and productivity of our landscapes.

Landcare is the movement that engages and empowers individuals, communities, businesses and governments to act as stewards of their landscapes. The actions taken by landcarers play a critical role in maintaining the health and productivity of Canberra and surrounding bush and rural areas, ensuring quality of life for present and future generations.

## **Why do we need the Agenda?**

### **A community vision for natural resource management**

The ACT has a number of strategies covering aspects of natural resource management, including nature conservation, water and catchment management and climate change. But there is no overarching strategy in place to integrate these thematic strategies, and to provide a clear direction for the sustainable management of our land and water resources in the ACT. The significant gaps are in relation to soil management, agriculture, and community education and capacity building. Importantly, there is insufficient monitoring, evaluation and reporting of agreed and robust metrics to gauge real sustainability outcomes. The result is a piecemeal approach – there is insufficient integration of environmental and agriculture programs with an assessment of the impacts these have on the landscape and the people living there.

The ACT has the opportunity to develop a holistic, integrated natural resource management strategy to improve outcomes in the field, and to empower the community to contribute to achieving and monitoring those outcomes.

The strategy development process could engage the community of Canberra, and inspire them with a future vision for their landscapes and their active role in maintaining local places.

### **Agriculture policy for the ACT**

There is currently no policy for the ACT that establishes a vision for the place of agriculture in the local economy and land use planning. Increasingly, rural landholders are being squeezed out, as urban development advances towards the surrounding nature reserves. In the face of climate change and a carbon-constrained future, retaining farming in and around our city is vital to Canberra's sustainability and its status as the bush capital. Landcare ACT advocates for placing a premium value on regional sustainable agriculture and supporting rural landholders in this vital role.

### **A review of natural resource management governance in the ACT**

Regional bodies have been established across Australia to oversee natural resource management. A critical part of this model is engagement of the community in decisions about overall natural resource management strategy, and funding allocations.

Uniquely, the ACT Regional Body is a unit of the ACT Government, which makes decisions on both national and ACT funding programs. While the ACT has a Natural Resource Management Council, this body is only charged with providing advice, and only on the expenditure of the National Landcare Program Regional Stream of funding. In addition, the Council does not report directly to the Minister, but rather to the Environment and Planning Directorate. We propose a review of these arrangements, including evaluating whether current landcare funding allocations are in line with local priorities.

The current National Landcare Program funding ceases in June 2018. This provides an excellent opportunity to improve the transparency of ACT natural resource management funding allocations in the ACT, and particularly to improve the participation of the community in decision-making.

### **Commitment to support community action and participation**

The Landcare movement empowers communities to care for their landscapes and their natural resources. We endorse the government facilitating of participation, and engendering community responsibility and ownership in stewardship of their lands. This role can be better supported by recognising the important role community groups play, supporting and rewarding their achievements, and enabling their capacity building and partnership development.

The three ACT Catchment Groups have established extensive community networks and as non-government organisations have trust of community members. It is vital that the ACT Government's approach recognises their essential role in supporting local Landcare groups.

Without this, there is a risk of losing environmental, social and economic benefits to the ACT community as well as loss of the established partnerships which are the legacy from previous investment. The future of the Catchment Groups can be safeguarded by making a commitment to ongoing base funding, requiring a minimum of about \$600 000 per annum.

The ACT Landcare community is not only participating in caring for the landscape, but is also actively involved in monitoring the ACT's natural resources. However, with judicious government investment, this significant community investment could be more effectively leveraged to contribute to integrated long-term monitoring of the ACT environment, for example through linking to State of the Environment reporting. The ACT's Waterwatch program is an example where government investment in capacity building has resulted in a comprehensive program of voluntary regional water quality monitoring.

The Frogwatch Program, however, which is amongst the longest running and most popular citizen science programs in the region, is in danger of disappearing due to reduced funding. Its funding has been reduced to a small annual contribution towards an annual frog count, insufficient to provide appropriate ongoing support for a volunteer citizen science program. Frogs are considered to be important indicators of broader catchment health. Frogwatch data gathering has successfully replaced government monitoring due to its recognised cost-effectiveness and opportunities for engaging volunteers of all ages.

### **Recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and culture in natural resource management**

Aboriginal people are strongly engaged in the ACT Landcare network. An Aboriginal Landcare group has been established to protect and enhance cultural sites and support Aboriginal people in connecting with their culture and their country. The ACT Government receives funds for Aboriginal natural resource management through the National Landcare Program, however, these funds are directed towards social outcomes. While these outcomes are critical, additional funding is required to also support Aboriginal people to work on country, and particularly on cultural sites in the region.

More funding is also required for cultural site assessments and cultural awareness training for landcarers. Many landcarers work on ACT Government land, and much of this work being conducted in reserves and urban open space has not gone through rigorous cultural assessment process. Each of the Catchment Groups have been working with Ngunawal custodians in identifying cultural sites in the region, however this is done for the purpose of community education regarding cultural heritage. Due to limited funding, no formal site assessment processes are undertaken. This means that land managers and landcarers may be working in areas where cultural significance is unknown, and potentially posing significant risks to cultural heritage. In addition, landcarers and land managers are also at risk of inadvertently breaching the ACT Heritage Act (2004).

In the absence of rigorous cultural site assessment, increased funding for training landcarers in cultural awareness is required. In particular, landcarers need to be aware of and be able

to recognise cultural artefacts, scar trees, and burial sites to prevent inadvertent damage to cultural sites.

Landcare ACT seeks funding commitments for increased cultural site assessments, which should take place before any natural resource management works are undertaken on ACT government land, and for workshops led by Aboriginal custodians to train landcarers in recognising and protecting heritage sites.

### **Funding for weed management**

Some weeds are so aggressively invasive that they take over the land, reducing plant diversity and threatening animal habitats. The result is major economic and biodiversity losses. Currently there is a lack of consistency in how weeds are tackled, due to limited resources and the associated funding priorities. Weed management programs are often forced to target national priority weeds over those which are doing more damage to our local landscapes.

African Lovegrass, for example, presents a significant weed threat to our farmlands and nature reserves, but is not a weed of national significance. If not controlled, African Lovegrass:

- quickly forms a monoculture, excluding other biodiversity
- reduces the productivity of farmlands, threatening business viability
- needs frequent mowing (which itself can spread the weed), increasing the cost of city maintenance; and
- burns much hotter than other grasses, potentially harming ecosystems, life and property.

There is a strong case for commitment of more resources to ongoing weed management in the ACT. The costs of managing our weeds are arguably less than the costs of not controlling them. Landcare ACT supports annual funding of at least \$2.4 million per year for weed control, as proposed by the ACT Conservation Council.

### **Commitment to education programs to ensure healthy ACT landscapes in the future**

Nothing is more important to the future of our young people than to understand how our physical environment supports our economic, social and other needs. It is therefore important to build among the next generation both the aspiration and capacity to be involved first-hand in conserving the environment. Sustainability is a cross-curriculum priority in the national curriculum. School students in the Bush Capital are ideally placed to explore the links between rural, natural and urban areas, including food supply, drinking water supply, and the health and amenity value of natural areas, as well as the significance of the species and habitats they support. Success of climate change adaptation depends on having people who are aware of the links between our healthy landscape and their lifestyles.