

# THE ACT CATCHMENT GROUPS VALUE PROPOSITION

Prepared by Southern ACT Catchment Group on behalf of the three Catchment Groups: Ginninderra Catchment Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group, and Molonglo Conservation Group  
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The ACT catchment groups combine over fifty years' organisational experience working with volunteers, rural landholders, schools, businesses and the broader community on matters of environmental restoration, conservation and catchment management. Their status as not-for-profit organisations allows them access to community funds, forums and conversations from which government is removed. Their well-established links with the local communities in which they are embedded, the Landcare movement, partner organisations and various government agencies positions them as key knowledge brokers in the region and a vital source of social capital.

The National Landcare Network's *Building a Resilient Australia* position articulates the value of the Landcare movement, which can be transferred directly to the value offered by an effective partnership with the catchment groups in the ACT:

- Safeguard the ACT's unique and irreplaceable wildlife and landscapes.
- Protect human habitation and infrastructure from the worst effects of extreme weather.
- Provide safe, clean water for environmental, domestic, industrial and agricultural uses.
- Help agricultural areas remain productive.
- Attract domestic and international tourists and associated business opportunities.
- Healthy, happy and well-connected communities that support the people within them.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are fully involved in the planning and execution of land management in Australia.
- City and country people understand and appreciate one another.
- Communities and landscapes are better prepared for the impacts of a changing climate.

With meaningful consultation and participative democracy likely to form an increasingly important component of government in the ACT, the catchment groups can be an ally of government, in connecting with the communities whom they serve. Equally, their ability to mobilise communities and volunteers and deliver community-based projects around public spaces and infrastructure also makes them a strong potential partner for developers, businesses, utility companies and other community organisations.

## 1. Introduction

This paper articulates the value of the local Landcare networks and community NRM organisations in the ACT, Southern ACT Catchment Group (SACTCG), Ginninderra Catchment Group (GCG) and Molonglo Conservation Group (MCG). It outlines their history and success in delivering not only environmental and ecological outcomes for the ACT region but also economic benefits, social resilience and cohesion in the community.

The value of Landcare across a range of areas has been well researched and documented beyond improving the health of local natural environments. This includes improvements in the areas of cultural, social (health and wellbeing, and social capital), economic, and community resilience (Ottesen, 2019). The need to reiterate these values in the ACT context is partly due to it not being well documented. In addition, it has long been recognised that there is difficulty in gathering data from a volunteer community, and limitations in measuring less quantifiable benefits such as those afforded to social, cultural and community welfare. It is intended that this summary will assist the networks to demonstrate their value to potential investors across the full range of these areas.

30 years on from the beginning of the Landcare and ParkCare movement in the ACT there is now a need to reinvigorate these organisations to grow their potential and build on previous investments in them both financially, and in terms of community contributions to their success. There is also a need to respond to strong community demand for community based - services provided by these organisations, in particular channelling community interest and efforts in stewarding and caring for local environmental assets and places of heritage significance.

## **2. A Brief History of Catchment Groups in the ACT Region**

The Victorian Government developed its Landcare Program in 1986 following urgent concerns of the effects of drought on the soil resource and consequent food production. The program was based on the principles of community-based learning and action to tackle a range of integrated land protection issues. It rose up from a local grass roots movement earlier in that decade with local groups involved in planning and implementing activities (Campbell & Seipen, 1994), (Love, C. 2011).

The 'Decade of Landcare' began in 1989 as an initiative of the Bob Hawke Government following the Victorian example. In the same year in the ACT, the volunteer ParkCare movement began and became the forerunners to Landcare in the ACT initiated to care for local reserves and supported by the Parks and Conservation Service (Environment ACT at the time). GCG formed independently as a not-for-profit established to support groups, SACTCG followed in 2002 as a response from a handful of ParkCare groups in the south who saw the need for coordination and administrative support to allow them to apply for grants and provide insurance for activities. A SACTCG coordinator was based in ACT Government and developed sub-catchment plans cementing a strong government-community partnership. MCG followed shortly after in 2003.

In 2002-2008 under NHT 2, the Regional model was instituted which saw core funding supporting three coordinator position in the catchment groups. This permitted the groups to maintain their organisations and to primarily undertake community capacity building activities.

Caring for our Country (CFoC) 2008-2013/14 followed as a phase of Landcare that has been noted as a phase that began to negatively impact on community engagement. In many regions the Landcare program moved to more centralised control, becoming output focused with high transaction costs, and wedged a gap between local and regional groups (Robins and Kanowski, 2011).

2013 saw the replacement of the CFoC with the National Landcare Program. From 2013-2018 the catchment groups through the ACT NRM focused heavily on project delivery and on-ground outcomes. This saw a growth in these groups in terms of delivering on-ground projects in a range of biophysical areas (soil, revegetation, erosion and weed control). Whilst they demonstrated a very strong capacity to support community engagement and knowledge building activities these activities were not perceived as a priority from ACT NRM whose contract with the Commonwealth focused heavily on biophysical targets. The catchment groups remained supportive of their community under this period of funding but found it increasingly difficult to maintain support for community capacity building and member support activities.

June 2018 saw the end of significant funding support from the ACT Government through the Commonwealth National Landcare Program 2. A period of reflection and reform for these groups has ensued to the present, with the strong push from their established community to not lose the gains made by the financial and social investment over the past 20 years. This pattern of funding loss from the Commonwealth has been reflected across the country with many State governments moving in to bolster networks and groups. This State level support model has provided an impetus for the ACT groups to strengthen their relationship with the ACT Government.

### **3. The Value to People and Community**

#### ***Canberra's liveability and community well-being***

The ACT population is predicted to reach 495, 000 by 2027 (ABS, Population Projections Australia 2017). With the current focus on 'growing services for our growing city', there is a real risk that the environmental values and services – clean air, clean water, and access to natural and semi-natural spaces – which underpin the appeal and success of Canberra as a place to live will be slowly degraded and undermined. Over the past few years Canberra has scored highly on a number of national and international 'liveability' rankings and the integration of the bush into the Bush Capital is consistently cited as major factor in this success. As the population of Canberra continues to grow and its demographic changes the need for continued engagement of the community with the sustainability of their city will increase.

Wellbeing surveys of rural and regional Australia by University of Canberra have been running since 2013 to provide information beyond economic prosperity with determinants factors of wellbeing (liveability) and resilience including human capital (community collaboration and leadership, and self-efficacy) social capital (sense of belonging and involvement) and natural capital (environmental health). Notably it has been shown that there is a strong correlation between volunteering and sense of wellbeing (Schirmer et al, 2016). Community-based Landcare by its nature is at the intersection of the relationship between human, social and natural capital and provides a sound model to value and manage these determinant factors of wellbeing.

Whilst there is limited data on the connection between engagement in NRM activities and well - being for the ACT region specifically, this connection has been shown in a Riverina Local Land Services publication measuring wellbeing in rural landholders. Here, a large proportion of those surveyed who were involved in community Landcare groups or NRM activities in some form or another showed a positive effect on the wellbeing in the areas of self-efficacy and identity (Schirmer, 2017).

#### ***Volunteerism and Social Capital***

Canberra as the bush capital has a very high level of volunteering per capita and derives significant benefits from its natural environment. In the ABS General Social Survey (ABS, General Social Survey 2014), the ACT ranked top in proportion of the population who volunteered (36.8%), with high rates for people aged 35 to 64 years in the ACT, older than the other States and Territories. ACT residents also show the highest participation rate in cultural activities (45.0%) demonstrating their level of engagement in non-work activities generally. This participation rate shows the significant 'social capital' that resides in the region and a recognised resource among the community that requires strategic support to reach its potential. Social capital, also referred to as community capital, recognises that social networks have value that can facilitate cooperation, and are either bonding (inward focused) or bridging (outward focused) (Putnam, 2000).

The Catchment groups, as well established and networked community organisations, are experts in delivering 'bridging capital'. That is, enablers that link people to external assets, disseminate information and foster broader engagement between people and groups in the community. The capability for communities to identify and address their own environmental problems has been attributed to the bridging capital afforded to groups such as the catchment groups and is well documented in the literature (Ottesen, 2019).

***Supporting regular volunteering  
and land stewardship***

*The catchment groups provide regular support to **60** small environmental groups, **4** citizen science programs and over **72** rural landholders collectively.*

*This comprises over **1000** dedicated volunteers (non-committee members) who engage in catchment group programs.*

This social capital effectively provides a capacity for the catchment groups to support the ACT Government, business, non-government agencies and partners in its engagement with the community on matters of environmental stewardship.

With the growing densification and development of ACT's urban areas, programs that improve environmental literacy and engage ACT citizens in caring for the public estate are essential. However, coordination and support are required to mobilise and leverage the community voluntary contributions to environmental management.

The ACT Government has been making its own internal investments in projects and personnel to facilitate better connection between the Canberra community and their environment. The catchment groups can be viewed as one component of a suite of approaches to continuing to develop Canberrans' sense of themselves as stewards of the land on which their city is built. Offering different engagement pathways to the public will increase the reach of ACT Government in influencing its constituents to embrace their responsibility as citizens of a jurisdiction which styles itself as a leader in 'environmental innovation' (ACT Government, 2019).

The catchment groups' engagement with their member Parkcare, Landcare and rural landholder members remains strong in facilitating a range of value adding services to the 'already converted'. This should be viewed as complementary to ACT Government efforts rather than in competition with it, as has seemed sometimes to be the case.

Catchment group member organisations recently identified that there are a number of areas where the catchment groups provide support, which is not offered through ACT Government, and which significantly boost what they can achieve including:

- Planning across groups in the context of ACT priorities and catchment or landscape scale objectives
- Assistance with administration, applying for grants and financial management, especially for those groups which are not incorporated.
- Access the formal local and national representation and knowledge-sharing through Landcare ACT and the National Landcare Network.
- Informal to knowledge sharing of, experience and stories and cross pollination of ideas between groups (beyond the ACT Government's ParkCare convenors meeting)
- Managing and overseeing projects which are beyond the capacity of a volunteer group or individual landholder.
- Bringing together rural landholders and urban conservation volunteers to share knowledge.
- Ability to bring in expertise and capacity for specific issues which are beyond the scope of groups, e.g. erosion control.
- Easy access to free resources, e.g. meeting rooms, IT services.

## Low Cost Erosion Control for ParkCarers

*SACTCG undertook a project to address the increasing erosion issues being reported by the ParkCare and Landcare Groups in Box-Gum woodland reserves. The project very successfully built capacity in the community to manage erosion in conservation areas whilst achieving on-ground outcomes.*

*Participants learnt about landscape hydrology and built "human scale" structures at erosion sites using limited resources and a soft approach to kick start the natural repair processes in the landscape. Work parties constructed structures principally build from logs, rocks and brush. Expert guidance and advice were provided across reserves to address individual landscapes and issues. This project has been replicated across the region and has resulted in significant skill development and repair works.*

*Key outcomes included:*

- *Increased capacity of Landcarers from **17** groups as well as individual landholders.*
- *More than **15** erosion structures built in **6** nature reserves by community groups.*
- *Small group workshops and on-site assessments provided to **9** ParkCare/Landcare Groups.*
- ***4** technical reports with recommendations provided to groups working in reserves.*

*Post workshop surveys showing expected high levels of adoption of practices were borne out with these techniques continuing to be used across the reserve system. The balance of theory and practical, and a variety of workshop scales, typical of a 'Landcare' style approach, was noted as the key reason for high levels of engagement.*





## ***Empowerment and Representation***

In the ACT it is recognised that locals possess a strong and unique knowledge of their local environment and are often best placed to know what actions are required than the central government.

Opportunities for individuals to proactively engage in their communities and in decisions that affect their local environment is a major contributor to community wellbeing. It has been well documented that centralised control of programs can lead to disempowerment and disengagement and reduced participation in the community (Zimmerman, 1995). The principal of subsidiarity (that is, devolving decision making to the lowest capable level) is well recognised in the literature as the best means of engaging people's skills and effort, with government playing a key role in planning providing direction, standards, guidelines, and incentives (Ryan et al, 2010).

The network structure of the catchment groups, and composition of community member dominated committees within the governance of these organisations, is paramount in providing this sense of empowerment to the community. In addition, adherence to the pyramidal structure for community representation utilised by the catchment groups (representation from the grass-roots groups to catchment groups to Landcare ACT and finally to the National Landcare Network) provides a clear pathway for individuals to contribute and have their voice heard.

## ***Community Consultation***

As locally based key community organisations the catchment groups are called upon to channel community views on a wide range of government plans, strategies and initiatives, providing submissions on behalf of their community on a regular basis. These organisations and their members are recognised as important program delivery agents, largely in the area of community engagement, in more than 8 ACT Government Strategies and Plans. These include the ACT Water Strategy 2014-2044, ACT and Region Catchment Strategy 2016-2046, ACT Conservation Strategy 2013-2023 and the ACT Climate Adaptation Strategy 2016.

This role 'eases the way' for the community in providing an assurance that their priorities for their local area are well represented. Whilst this role is not well supported it provides significant value to policy makers who can access 'a one stop shop' where the diverse and sometimes disparate community views have been collated and prioritised from a geographical area. These views also benefit from the institutional memory within the catchment groups which can contextualise community opinion and ensure historical impacts of policy on the community are well understood.

## **4. Community Knowledge and Awareness Raising**

### ***Knowledge brokering***

It is well established that knowledge is a key element to effect change in sustainable land management. However, the loss of knowledge (or amnesia, as it is referred to in the literature), has plagued NRM programs and been blamed for poor continuity, short term and knee jerk policy and poor evolution of programs and planning in NRM (Campbell, 2006).

'Knowledge brokering' is a specific skill that links target information and synthesises and provides information from a number of sources to a given audience and catered to that audience. Landcare (catchment) group facilitation is an example of this and provides a strong example of the value of this form of information provision (Campbell, 2006).

An essential contribution of the catchment groups is their ability to provide a conduit to harness and share local knowledge across the system (and land tenures) and preserve knowledge and memory in the face of

changing priorities, political cycles and institutional amnesia. This is not possible without the valuable connections with knowledge-growing institutions with which relationships are well established (eg. Australian National University, University of Canberra, Peter Cullen Trust). By brokering information horizontally, as opposed to 'top down', information exchange is often better received by community who are sometimes not amenable to government extension (Ottesen, 2019).

Andrew Campbell in 1995 described Landcare's role in cultivating 'land literacy' by distributing the best available information and preserving local knowledge and memory. In the ACT this remains true, with catchment groups harnessing knowledge from the well-educated and long serving Landcarers and ParkCarers and providing the institutions to hold these valuable memories of the land, programs, and successes and failures in NRM. Opportunities also exist for the catchment groups to use their expertise in knowledge brokering and facilitating relationships into the growing sector of housing developments.

### ***Awareness Raising and Education***

"As has been long acknowledged, Landcare has been successful in moving community attitudes towards sustainability, in providing information and stimulating attitudinal change" (Toyne and Farley, 2000).

Community involvement and community-based action through Landcare networks have increased understanding of the causes and symptoms of environmental degradation and the impact of poor land management practices. Networks have also encouraged broader community awareness of environmental challenges, such as conservation, sustainable resource use, climate change and food security (Love, 2011).

Effective community engagement is often cited by policy makers and land managers as one of the biggest challenges in delivering their work. The ACT has the opportunity to become national leaders in community engagement practice due to a number of factors including the small size of the jurisdiction; inter-connectedness of its communities; high levels of volunteerism; high visibility of natural and semi-natural areas in the urban landscape; and proximity to both productive rural areas and protected area reserves.

In the ACT region delivering awareness raising and knowledge and skill building activities has been the 'bread and butter' of the catchment groups. This was borne out in the period 2013 to 2018 when these groups combined have delivered into the region a minimum of:

- 750 education and awareness raising activities for the community
- 40 interpretive Aboriginal Heritage walks with more than 880 participants
- 159 environmental field days and workshops
- sustainable agriculture field days for 330 rural landholders
- 6 Green Army Teams which employed and trained 56 youth who delivered 2 years of restoration works.

### ***Educating the Community***

*An estimated 9000 individuals engage in conservation management through the catchment groups per annum.*

*These includes regular volunteers and individuals who engage in one off events such as educative forums, field days, workshops and receive targeted information and education materials.*

*The audience is highly inclusive and involves school children, corporate volunteers, retirees, businesses and the general community.*

*The quantum of hours of community engagement is often understated. A conservative estimate for the ACT Region is 53,000 hours per year of community time.*

Catchment groups have been responsible for introducing and scaling up ideas that help bring about positive and enduring impacts in the region. These include low cost erosion control, Aboriginal Landcare and bringing local aboriginal knowledge to the ParkCare community, and Frogwatch). The strong alliances formed between the catchment groups and local Aboriginal elders has demonstrated the ability for these organisations to take up opportunities to broaden land management knowledge in areas not previously visited such as the Aboriginal Landcare Program formed by Ginninderra Catchment Group (GCG, Aboriginal Landcare, 2019).

## Bush on the Boundary

*Bush on the Boundary (BOB) was established for developments at Molonglo in 2010 and Googong in 2012 in collaboration with Conservation Council ACT and Molonglo Conservation Group.*

*The Molonglo BOB facilitated consultation on the Molonglo River Reserve Plan of Management, while at Googong focus is on the residential interface with Aprasia conservation areas, the Googong Dam foreshores and water quality into local creeks and, ultimately, the Queanbeyan River. In 2019, emphasis at Molonglo is on engaging with the new residents of Wright and Coombs to work with residents at the interface with the Molonglo River.*

*The Googong BOB provides a key stakeholder group for a collaborative project involving the conservation of the Pink-tailed Worm Lizard and also focuses on the region's distinctive Box Gum Woodland being conducted in the township over six years, co-funded by NSW Saving Our Species and the Googong Township developer (PEET).*





## Citizen Science

The ACT is home to a number of very successful citizen science projects – perhaps most notably Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch, Frogwatch and Canberra Nature Map. The value of such programs is increasingly recognised both nationally and internationally as a powerful combination of community engagement and engagement with collection of data that can be used for baseline ecological monitoring to determine management decisions and measure their efficacy. They are also an inspiring example of the success that is possible when community and government work together with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

### The ACT and Region Frogwatch Program

*A well-known citizen science program engaging hundreds of volunteers annually in frog related research and community education. Operating since 2002, the program is run by the GCG but works across the entire Capital region.*

*Awareness raising and educational activities are provided to the general public, special interest groups and schools. Frogwatch is best known for its many presentations, including frog-habitat workshops and the annual Tadpole Kits for Schools Program.*

*Key projects:*

- *The annual October FrogCensus monitors frog populations at approximately 250 established Frogwatch sites.*
- *The Climate Change Project weekly monitored 15 sites between June and October 2015-2018 to track climate induced changes in frog breeding behaviour.*
- *The Bio-indicator study (2015 and 2018) investigated species-specific habitat preferences of ACT frogs.*
- *In partnership with the University of Canberra the world's first FrogPhone was developed – a remote acoustic survey device based on mobile phone technology*

*Frogwatch attracts a wide range of volunteers, including school aged students, scout groups and young families, and has provided an important stepping stone for often underrepresented volunteer groups into other NRM related activities.*

*The Frogwatch Program has been recognized for its outstanding achievements by the ACT Government through the 2015 Citizen Science Award, and the 2017 Environment Community Awards.*

*Key achievements include:*

- *over 8,000 frog surveys/20,000 sightings since 2002*
- *trained over 2000 volunteers*
- *rehabilitation of frog habitat*
- *2 peer reviewed publications (Westgate et al. 2015, Garrido-Sanchis et al. in press)*
- *Tadpole Kits for School program running since 2012*



The catchment groups are already key partners in the Waterwatch program, and Molonglo Conservation Group has developed the Vegwatch program as a means of monitoring vegetation communities over time. There are opportunities to explore other citizen science programs for the ACT, especially as the impacts of climate change become more apparent in the living landscape, and the catchment groups are natural partners for ACT Government and partner environmental community groups in developing such programs.

## 5. Resilience

### *Climate change mitigation and adaptation*

Resilience as applied to both the community and ecology is increasingly vital to maximise the ability to the 'weather the change' we expect to see in our changing climate and uncertainty in food security over the next 20 years.

The function of groups such as the catchment groups in providing social learning, education and extension skills is also a potential resource in helping communities improve their ability to respond to stressful situations (Ottesen, 2019). Landcare networks bring people together, facilitating discussion about appropriate responses to changes. Networks also bring access to additional funds for communities to deal with these changes and gain a sense of empowerment in what can be perceived as 'larger than us' issue.

As organisations that provide a social infrastructure and promote social capital they have real potential for building resilience in their local communities following natural disasters. An example of this was seen in 2003 following the ACT firestorm, where the catchment groups, whilst still in their infancy, were able to quickly engage in information and recovery programs in the region.

#### ***'CAMPFIRE'***

*The CAMPFIRE (Community Assessment Monitoring Program for Fire Impacted River Ecology) program was able to form quickly allowing water quality monitoring of fire effected sites using the pre-existing and new Waterwatch volunteer groups. This enabled the community in partnership with CRC for with Freshwater Water Ecology establish and assess sites over 4 years post fires and has formed baseline data that has been built on over the last 15 years.*

*Importantly it provided valuable community strengthening and opportunities for individuals to participate in the Territory's recovery from this catastrophic natural disaster.*



In terms of resilient environments Landcare practices promoted by the catchment groups are heavily focused on improving the health, robustness and resilience of ecosystems. The need to invest in assisting land managers (and volunteers) in weed control, groundcover retention and improving efficiency in water use and revegetating with drought resistant species are all essential to build resilience to drought (Brown and Schirmer, 2018).

The catchment group model of operating in partnership with a range of other agencies provides an excellent example for collective learning and maintaining social and natural capital to approach complex and difficult environmental issues at the local level (Hamparsum et al. 2016).

### **Upper Murrumbidgee Actions for Clean Water (ACWA) Plan**

*In 2012 a severe storm erosion event in the Murrumbidgee River triggered a broad partnership between Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority (CMA), ACT Natural Resource Management Council, Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Coordinating Committee, Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch and ACTEW Water.*

*This collaborative, cross-jurisdictional venture involving representatives from all tiers of government, non-government organisations, scientists, community groups and landholders demonstrated the value of a strong partnership model. This partnership was able to consolidate information from all partners, identified point and diverse sources of turbidity and erosion risk in the Upper Murrumbidgee system and developed priority actions.*

*This collaboration was triggered by 'The Sands Waterwatch Group' identifying an unprecedented sediment reading in the Murrumbidgee at Casurina Sands. It has not only led to a growth of community interest and monitoring but has been instrumental in informing policy makers on the where to target key erosion mitigation in the area. Results of ACUA remain relevant in guiding the UMCN, the ACT and Regional Catchment Management Coordination Group, Governments, Councils and community partners.*

### **Culture Change - The Landcare Ethic**

The catchment groups embody the principle of land stewardship, inherited through the Landcare ethic that has changed the way we think about land management in Australia over the past 30 years. This ethic strengthens local communities' connection to place and brings into consciousness the impacts we have on our environment fostering community resilience and agency to make behaviour changes and work tirelessly to improve environments in which they live. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the value of culture change, the ability for organisations such as the catchment groups to continue functioning 'on a shoe string', garner unfailing volunteer support and attract passionate dedicated staff who also volunteer, is a testament to this ethos. This ethos carries significant esteem and as such has spread beyond Australia on the Landcare brand.

## 6. The Environmental & Ecological Value

### *The Environment*

Literature describes Landcare and other community-based groups as particularly important in biodiversity conservation because of their close connection with the community (Ecker, 2016). Landcare networks consisting of volunteers, landholders and paid staff is known to deliver more sustainable systems of land use and management in partnership with government (Campbell 1997).

The ACT contains 48 protected areas comprising 130 826 ha of the total 235 817 ha area of the Territory (ACT Region Summary ACT, 2019). With the high proportion of land being managed for conservation, considerable resources are required to manage threats to the biodiversity and ecological values of these areas. The scale of weed infestations alone in the ACT region requires a combined effort from government and community if any reduction in the pressure on natural ecosystems is going to be realised.

Of recognised importance is the need to protect the threatened ecological species in these areas. The ACT is a stronghold for the nationally threatened Yellow Box - Red Gum Grassy Woodland community and Natural Temperate Grasslands. The catchment groups have undertaken a large portion of their work protecting these ecological communities, garnering community support and efforts in their protection and restoration.

### ***Delivering environmental outcomes***

*The catchment groups ability to deliver on-ground programs has greatly strengthened over the past 6 years, where they have undertaken significant projects across the region at a landscape scale and in a partnership approach and in particular in these ecological communities. In the period 2013 to 2018 these groups combined have delivered:*

- *6,460 hectares of weed control on public land and on rural land*
- *190 hectares of vertebrate pest management*
- *50 erosion control actions*
- *370 hectares of revegetation (including 7000 trees and shrubs plantings on the Murrumbidgee River and 5500 shrubs and grasses plantings on Ginninderra Creek)*

### ***Economic Value***

For over 20 years, the catchment groups have significantly multiplied the value of ACT Government investment in environmental management and Parkcare and Landcare outcomes. This has involved leveraging approximately \$2 million per annum in in-kind contributions to manage ACT's environmental assets, through mobilising community volunteers. This estimate is conservative. In the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's 2017 report 'Environmental-Economic Accounts for ACT State of Environment Reporting' the estimated value of volunteer activity from 2013 to 2016 was in excess of 22% of total ACT Government expenditure on the environment.



The most recent estimate of the replacement cost of environmental volunteers in terms of wages is \$50.5 Million per year. The report also notes that this figure does not contain the value volunteers place on the 'intangible' personal benefits from participation such as an increase to psychological and physical well-being.

The catchment groups play a vital role in bringing in additional funds into the region in the form of grants, partnerships and donations. Their status as not-for-profit charities with DGR status enables them to apply for a range of funds not accessible to government agencies. On average an estimated \$1,500 000 per year has been leveraged by these groups to undertake environmental activities with the community. These projects occur for the most part on ACT Government land and to a lesser degree on leasehold land in the region.

A demonstration of the perceived value of the groups was seen in June 2019 when \$2.6 million was offered as an election promise from federal Labor to the three groups to fund the restoration of urban waterways across the three catchment areas. At a local level, as community contacts for local Members, they provide vital information to the Legislative Assembly on investment priorities for the local natural environment. In a media release in May 2019 the Canberra Liberal Party announced a promise to provide consistent yearly core funding to these groups should they win office in 2020 in recognition of the groups' work.

The ability to leverage these commitments, strengthened by the politically non-affiliated nature of the groups, demonstrates the unique value of community based NRM organisations to the region. Whilst the winner for these investments, if realised, would in the end user, the local community, the ACT Directorates who would directly benefit from this investment would be the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development and Transport Canberra and City Services.

In the context of local food production, economic value in terms of reduced loss in agricultural production is also worth considering for Landcare agencies. The ACT holds 25 448 ha of Agricultural land. In 2017–18, the gross value of agricultural production in the Australian Capital Territory was \$11 million. The gross value of cattle and calves were \$2.4 million, for wool was \$1.2 million and for poultry was \$1.2 million (ABARES, About my Region – Australian Capital Territory, 2019).

These figures are expected to be reduced further following recent dry periods and selling of livestock (Gullett pers. comm). Broadacre crops form a small part (37 ha) of local agriculture holdings. (Noting this does not include the nearby areas of agricultural land in the broader region). The cost of the impact of weeds to agricultural land in the region is anecdotally high with African Lovegrass invasion dominating pastures and notably reducing available feed (nationally the cost of lost agricultural production to weeds is \$2.5 Billion per year) (DEE &DAWR, 2017). Feral animals are also a real cost to agriculture in the ACT. In a 2017 Landcare ACT Survey of Landholder capacity building needs, landholders ranked assistance in the management of weeds and pests' top priorities. Drought impacts on local agriculture are reducing the carrying capacity of productive lands and the challenges ahead for soil, water and biodiversity are predicted to exponentially grow under a changing climate.

Over the past 20 years the catchment groups have played a vital role in assisting landholders manage the impacts of these threats to their agricultural enterprise and engagement has grown significantly in the past 7 years. The catchment groups provide both financial assistance (through yearly competitive grants) as well as access to knowledge and capacity building activities to help maintain farming enterprises whilst improving environmental outcomes on rural and peri-urban land.

## ***The Catchment Group Green Army Team Program***

*This partnership delivered a community-driven Green Army Program to the ACT community was led by the Southern ACT Catchment Group with Service Provider ACT's Conservation Volunteers Australia and in partnership with Molonglo and Ginninderra Catchment Groups. As an award winning partnership coordinating 6 teams over 2 years, bolstering the work over 25 volunteer groups and rural landholders in conservation.*

*This program was initially met with reluctance by the volunteer community. The Catchment Groups identified barriers to success and vastly improved this iteration of the program at a local level by providing significantly higher levels of support and coordination. This led to strong engagement and the program being highly regarded by the community.*

*The program supported existing projects with Landcare and Parkcare groups who are members of the ACT Catchment Group Networks. Activities included wetland re-establishment, erosion control, African Lovegrass control, carp removal, rabbit warren-mapping, fire recovery, grassland restoration, weed control, riparian restoration and fencing of box gum woodland and revegetation.*

*Key achievements included:*

- *56 young people trained in land management*
- *over 250 water quality, macro-invertebrate surveys and riparian assessments*
- *over 650 hectares of weeding*
- *planting of over 14,500 native plants*
- *100 hectares of erosion management*

*The Aboriginal Green Army team, worked on country caring for heritage sites, and fostered confidence and identity of the young participants by providing network connections and cultural mentoring with Ngunawal elder Wally Bell.*

*The coordination by the catchment groups at the regional level has been hailed as one of the most successful models nationally. It enabled diverse needs of local groups could to be matched to the specific skills and capabilities of each team. Being exposed to the social benefits of volunteerism also led to volunteering taken up by many participants.*



*Aboriginal Team at Theodore Grinding grooves with local mentor Wally Bell*

Whilst 'Landcare' activities do continue with no support structures in place, the estimated benefit from 'supported' Landcare has been shown to deliver a \$6 return to every \$1 invested (Aurecon, 2018). Opportunities to integrate 'regenerative agriculture' into farming practice in the region is now, more than ever, required and catchment groups are already the key community agents for change in this area and poised to optimised the returns for the region.

## **7. The Landcare Brand**

The Landcare brand is a well-recognised brand nationwide with thousands of groups utilising the logo to identify their belonging to the movement, the ethic and different reiterations of a National Program.

The catchment groups have participated in the National Landcare Network (NLN) through the NLN members council since its inception. This has been vital to bring these small networks' into the big picture' and to have the ACT represented on the national stage under the Landcare banner. The value of local networks linking the ACT region to the national movement is not quantifiable but has permitted community Landcare in the ACT to significantly contribute to policy development and messaging to decision makers. The catchment groups have not delved into the potential economic value of the Landcare brand. However, they have been part of the national discussion on the potential to use the brand as a revenue source to support local networks (for example a certification on sustainable agriculture products). For the present, the brand is owned by Landcare Australia and any further investigation and will require discussion with peak bodies across the nation.

## **8. Conclusion**

The value of community Landcare is well elucidated in the literature and this strongly reflects the value the catchment groups in the ACT. Investment in these organisations by the community and governments to date have been significant and has involved building social networks, natural capital and people working together to improve our biodiversity, soils, vegetation and water. The returns on this investment have been vast with those engaging with catchment group programs demonstrating a considerable contribution and altruistic effort that has helped make the 'bush capital' a place that maintains 'a healthy patch of Australian bush'.

Understanding how best to optimise the value of these organisations requires the strengthening of partnerships with government and non-government agencies. There are myriad areas where the catchment groups can add value to the community, government, developers, utility companies and business both through adding to existing projects and programs in partnership and by running complementary programs of their own. Community based NRM is a fundamental component of delivering outcomes for the local ACT environment and community who benefit from it. With the not-insignificant challenges ahead in managing our living environment and caring for people within it, the best model will involve cooperation between sectors, public, private and community.

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