

## **Landscape Sustainability through Blackberry Management: emerging roles for the community-led approach and the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce?**

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### **Introduction**

For the last decade, the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) has been facilitating, and supporting, a community-led approach to blackberry management across Victoria. This has resulted in, to date, nine community groups being formed and four currently being facilitated.

The VBT's experience has highlighted the importance of being able to provide flexible and locally-specific support for land managers and their communities which reflect their individual histories, circumstances and experiences. This paper reflects on some of the lessons learned from this decade of engagement and action.

### **The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT)**

The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) was formed in 2001 with the aim of reducing both the spread and impacts of blackberry (*rubus fruticosus*). The Taskforce does this by working with state, regional and local natural resource managers, community organisations and private landholders.

As one of the Victorian Government's 3 Community Weed Model groups, the VBT emphasises and encourages community participation in blackberry control through community capacity building and providing incentives for action. It also provides strategic direction to Government agencies and communities for blackberry control.

As discussed below, our approach moves beyond the 'community-weed model' (as it's commonly known in some Government agencies and other approaches to weed management – for example, the Gorse and the Serrated Tussock Taskforces). We are more concerned with a process rather than a model and we argue a truly community-led approach needs to move away from a mindset of developing technical/scientific blueprints for natural resource interventions to one which is focused on community and individual actions (supported by technical/scientific approaches where necessary and relevant). This is different to (and sometimes the opposite of) other approaches where technical and scientific interventions are 'supported' by communities and individuals.

### **The Community-Led Approach (C-LA)**

The importance of the community-led approach in general, and to blackberry control in particular, has been explored previously (see, for example, Furze *et al* [2008], Reid *et al* [2009]).

However, it's important to remember that the C-LA is a contested process and different interpretations of 'community-led' result in different outcomes and different impacts. Recognising this allows us to place, at centre stage, the reasoning/rationale for a C-LA.

Not only the international experience of C-LA but our own experiences suggest a continuum of motivations/rationales:

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Ease of  
NRM interventions

Ethical position related to  
Community action

*Figure 1: Rationale for undertaking a community-led approach*

'Ease of NRM interventions' highlights an approach to community-engagement where the C-LA idea is framed by ease of an outside intervention. Typically, this approach tends to see communities as recipients of an intervention (often a government or NRM agency intervention) and it's easier to have the community on-side. Here, understanding the problem, and the interventions themselves are predominantly framed by the outside agency.

At the other end of the continuum (the 'Ethical position') the C-LA is framed by the rights of communities. These rights (which also include responsibilities) consist of things such as a right to have their voices and their concerns heard, the crucial knowledge and experiences local people have in problem identification and problem solving, and the capacities (and responsibilities) local people and local communities have to act on issues and to engage in strategies for sustainability.

Because these act as opposite ends of a continuum, they represent 'either/or'. However, as we'll see in this paper, realities 'on the ground' tend to mean it is rare for something to be at the ends – certainly, the VBT's experience is indicative of the challenges in moving C-LAs towards the ethical end of the continuum.

### **Lessons learned so far: some reflections on the experiences of the VBT and the C-LA**

It is an opportune time to reflect on the lessons of the VBT. As mentioned previously, over the last decade our actions have focused on community participation, community engagement and locally-focused blackberry management. We have been moving towards that ethical end of the continuum, a move that has taken time, patience and effort. The following highlights the more significant lessons we have learned in this process.

#### *Understanding the landscape context: demography, socio-economic change and land management*

Almost by definition, the C-LA moves thinking away from focusing on individual land managers to a broader concept of communities, and, importantly, communities in landscapes. In this sense, it takes what can be broadly called a 'landscape approach' to blackberry management.

Fisher *et al* (2005) describe a landscape approach as one which 'meets objectives in different parts of the wider landscape rather than trying to address them in a single site' (p xv). By recognising both commonality and difference across a landscape, the approach tends to focus on:

- The ways landscapes are diverse in socio-economic, community and ecological terms
- The ways different parts of landscapes are integrated.
- Recognising the broader socio-economic and political processes which impact on landscapes and which are perhaps beyond the reach of local communities to do anything about
- Through all of the above, the opportunities and challenges associated with rolling out approaches across regions

One of the key lessons we have learned is the importance of the landscape approach. Our landscape approach by definition incorporates multiple stakeholders across regions (private land managers, Government agencies, natural resource management and other local institutions for example).

We also acknowledge there can be significant challenges across the landscapes where we work. An obvious challenge for one landscape, such as a high number of absentee landholders, is less of a challenge for another landscape, where the main issues relate to an ageing farming population. The causes of both these challenges are at once local and beyond the region. They represent aspects of broader, sometimes global socio-economic trends and of political responses to them. Yet they can't be ignored as they are part of the uniqueness of local communities and represents issues faced within landscapes themselves.

#### *A focus on cooperation rather than conflict*

Our starting point for our work in landscapes has been cooperation. Underpinning our approach is a belief that, given the chance and given support, individual land managers and communities will be able to work together to identify their blackberry problems and then look at options for the most appropriate local management options. In this sense, blackberry management has significant social, economic, cultural and political components to it, and is not just scientific/technical management.

#### *Listening to local experiences*

Perhaps the foundation of the VBT's approach can be captured by listening – to local problems, to local experiences, to land holder ideas, to their potential and their constraints. Local action groups act locally and feed their experiences into the VBT, who then is able to feed these experiences into agencies. In this way, the VBT ensures local experiences are reflected in its dual role – of support for local action groups and as an advocate of the C-LA in Government agencies.

#### *Tailoring approaches to landholder and group needs*

A crucial part of the VBT's role is to facilitate and/or to support locally-relevant and locally-focused approaches to blackberry management. Our work with existing community blackberry groups provides support for locally-generated initiatives. In this way, we are able to support ideas and actions coming directly from local communities and individual landholders via their landscape-based community action groups.

Our work facilitating or supporting the emergence of new groups remains an important part of our focus. To further support this priority, we have developed what we have called a 'Blackberry Action Group Start-Up Kit'. This multi-media kit provides information on starting up groups as well as interviews with group members which focus on their experiences of the blackberry C-LA.

*Acting as advocates for this approach in Government agencies: community voices, community experiences and agency policy/practice implications*

One of the key roles the VBT has is providing strategic advice to relevant Government agencies. This happens at a number of levels and, depending on the landscapes, across agencies.

At one level, the VBT provides advice to the Department of Primary Industries. Here, its role tends to be strategic in the sense of providing advice from the groups and therefore basing it in local experiences.

Because of the VBT's landscape approach, individual action groups have cross-agency memberships, including the Department of Sustainability and the Environment as well as Parks Victoria. Through this, the VBT is able to get a greater understanding of agency approaches as they are felt 'on the ground' together with the implications for blackberry management.

In this way, the VBT acts to mediate between agency policies and practices and local needs, approaches and actions. To be able to achieve this, its imperative the VBT is able to act with and on behalf of communities as well as with, and on behalf of, key Government agencies.

Of course, this can have implications because the VBT often finds itself straddling different approaches to, and different assumptions about, the C-LA. For example, at some point the issue of compliance represents a point of departure from a C-LA to one which is based in individual land manager legal responsibilities and agency responsibilities and practices. On the one hand, a C-LA builds trust, networks and local responsibilities, yet the legal requirements which frame compliance may conflict with these C-LA processes. Consequently, there is a balance which needs to be struck, and a role for the VBT to mediate this in search of the balance.

*Being comfortable with making mistakes: being reflexive*

Being reflexive has been crucial to the VBT's role. Reflexivity is a key part of an action learning cycle (sometimes simplistically described as 'adaptive management' in some natural resource management) where processes, actions and outcomes are continuously and critically reflected on to incorporate experiences into an on-going cycle of improved processes, actions and outcomes. In this way, reflexivity means learning from both the good and the mistakes.

### **Towards landscape sustainability?**

As mentioned above, the VBT has taken what can broadly be described as a landscape approach in its role in blackberry management. One of the things we know about the C-LA is that benefits often stretch beyond single sites and single issues to broader socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological processes. Indeed, this is the foundation of the landscape approach described earlier.

*Implications for landscape sustainability*

Because of this, as more community action groups emerge, it is likely the VBT will be able to be much more fully engaged with aspects of landscape sustainability through its action groups.

There are two significant reasons for this. Firstly, the emergence of action groups means increasing areas within landscapes come under blackberry management at a local level. Therefore, as increasing areas are managed, landscape sustainability is further enhanced.

Secondly, the C-LA to this kind of landscape sustainability reflects complex, multi-dimensional components to sustainability. This can be understood in terms of biodiversity protection (ecological

sustainability), economic productivity (economic sustainability), enhanced social capital through group actions (socio-cultural sustainability) and political support for local approaches (political sustainability).

Therefore, the contributions of the approach to landscape sustainability start to move beyond just blackberry to incorporate a range of benefits to socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological processes.

#### *Implications for other pest management approaches*

The VBT's experience has highlighted a number of important lessons which can be shared:

- There is no one C-LA. In fact, the idea that there is a 'community weed model' is perhaps a contradiction. Communities are not all the same, and one of the challenges for C-LAs to pest management is to have in place structures, approaches and ethics which allow communities to develop their own approaches.
- Consequently, one of the things we have to move away from is the idea of 'blueprints for action'. A C-LA isn't one where blueprints are useful. It's one where processes are negotiated across the board (locally, within the Task Force and within Government agencies) so that local approaches can be facilitated, supported, built on and actioned.
- This requires flexibility and also an attitude that allows mistakes to be made and lessons learned, and also Government agencies broadly supportive of these approaches (that is, tending towards the end of the continuum which reflects a C-LA as an ethical approach rather than just a practical one – sometimes a challenge for agencies which emphasise blue-print and 'rational/scientific' management).
- Of course, not all approaches which come from the local level are, by definition, positive. This requires a role for agencies or taskforces that are positive and build on the beginnings of the approach and support local learning and understanding, rather than being primarily concerned with intervention and imposition.

There are plenty of challenges and plenty of pitfalls. But there is also plenty of potential for making long-term change across landscapes.

#### *What next for the VBT?*

The VBT will continue to support local groups and continue to represent the benefits of these local approaches to relevant agencies.

However, there is an important role to be looked at further, and that is the on-going contribution to landscape sustainability that the actions of the community groups are able to make. We have identified in the discussions above, the advantages in broader sustainability terms of the landscape approach which the VBT has used. Its potential for these broader issues remains something for the next phase of the VBT's development.

#### **Conclusions**

As mentioned in previous papers (Reid 2009, Furze 2008) blackberry management is much more than a technical or scientific issue. It is one of socio-cultural values, economic and demographic processes and policy development and practice.

The paper has reflected on some of the lessons learned from the VBT's decade using a C-LA to blackberry management and identified lessons and challenges not only for blackberry management but also for pest management in general.

These are significant issues and there are significant challenges. A community-led approach, however, offers us the best opportunity to deal with these at a local level and to contribute to broader landscape sustainability.

## References

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