

Conclusion: Encouraging Communities to Use the Sustainable Space

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The stories in this book confirm that the notion of a truly sustainable community is not necessarily an unreachable idyll bandied around as a cure-all solution for what is wrong in our society with glib references to what happened in the 'good old days'. Everywhere there are individuals interested in bringing people together in support of an issue close to their hearts and to build a more joined-up community. What is clear is that successful community groups are those that have a strategic purpose, encourage open communication between members and, most importantly, have enough passion for their particular area of interest to ensure ongoing commitment from their membership. In terms of government–community relationships, the new approaches to encouraging community participation in decision making are encouraging but it is also vital that all parties to such processes are on a level playing field and that the power relations are not skewed so as to alienate particular groups.¹ This conclusion touches on some of the issues faced by the community at a time when people's time is short and there is competition for their attention.

I grew up in an English village which has held a traditional Harvest Home celebration for a hundred years or more, complete with a luncheon for five hundred people following the requisite thanksgiving service and brass band procession through the village. An invitation to 'carve' the festive ham and salt beef was a sought after sign that you were a 'local': this took my father twenty-five years to achieve despite marrying into one of the village's oldest families. This annual celebration on the last Thursday in August was what defined East Brent as a vibrant rural community. It provided an after-lunch platform for local

politicians and invited speakers. In 2004, the speaker's antipathy to the forthcoming foxhunting ban in the United Kingdom drew appreciative murmurs from the crowd. It was a rite of passage for young people to make the transition from the children's races and fancy dress competition after afternoon tea to being a waiter at luncheon, fighting to catch the lucky piece of cheddar cheese thrown into the crowd, and swigging a few sly glasses of cider when no-one was looking. Over the years things change, of course. The decline in rural employment and the growing numbers of 'outsiders'², who have no connections with the tradition, have had an impact on the availability and willingness of people to participate so the work is now done by just a few people determined to keep the Harvest Home alive. Community support for such events or interest groups is cyclical depending on available time and the value attributed to the various activities by individuals and the community as a whole. The Harvest Home did stop for a few years during World War II but was quickly reinstated by a willing community. It may be the case that aspects of traditional activities will change over time: this is a common occurrence in community groups when a change of leadership or membership occurs, but this does not mean that the activity will necessarily be lost. This story and the others in this book serve to remind us that communities are powerful, and though change or progress may occur it is still possible to 'do it for themselves'.

In compiling this book, some suggested that communities cannot 'do it' alone without government assistance to make it possible. Outside funding is vital to run some community-based programs;³ philanthropy is not common in Australia and thus most funding is derived from government sources. However, this funding is usually short term and subject to various requirements according to government policy at the time. Take, for example, the recent regionalisation strategy for natural resource management (NRM) funding through the Natural Heritage Trust: government funded coordinator and project officer positions have been withdrawn from individual community catchment groups with the money redirected to employing regional NRM experts. These volunteer catchment groups had become progressively bureaucratised through the previous governance processes and, depending on the

strength of the volunteers' willingness and ability to steer the group's activities, had become more or less dependent on outside (largely government) funding to carry out their work. It appears that the policy of actively requiring community engagement in caring for the environment has been rationalised with much of the work now more often carried out by regional environmental specialists and 'Work for the Dole' programs.⁴ Some of these catchment groups will revert to 'Friends' Groups' as described by O'Byrne⁵ but many others are already dysfunctional and exist in name only for funding purposes.

Gregg has described the imposition of bureaucratic structures on community groups as 'calcifying' community spirit.⁶ When too much governance is imposed on a community endeavour and peoples' efforts are rebuffed as noncompliant with rules and regulations, then they lose interest and community initiative is replaced with the mantra that it is 'up to the government to fix it'. This has broad implications for the future of our society.

Hamilton critiques the current reliance by both sides of politics on the power of economic growth to provide solutions to societal problems.

Despite several decades of sustained economic growth, our societies are no happier than they were. Growth not only fails to make people contented; it destroys many of the things that do. Growth fosters empty consumerism, degrades the natural environment, weakens social cohesion and corrodes character. Yet we are told, ad nauseam, that there is no alternative.⁷

Consumerism has created social isolation. It is easier to turn on the television to watch 'reality TV' after a long day at work than to go out to a cold and draughty hall to attend a community meeting or to spend valuable free time at the weekend helping with a local sporting or youth group. The juggle between time and money has become unbalanced. In order to fund consumption-based lifestyles, quality time spent with family and the local community has diminished. It is important to recognise that community and individual wellbeing do not necessarily

require large sums of money but, rather, can be achieved by changing priorities to reflect a more easily sustainable lifestyle and recognition of skills and interests that are latent in the community needing only to be aroused. It is noteworthy that recent large-scale housing developments such as Ellenbrook and Brighton Beach, on the edges of the Perth metropolitan area, while selling a lifestyle have employed community development experts to create opportunities for such community cohesion to occur.

When a community group comes together, it needs to be open to listening to all those who wish to contribute. Too rigid a structure can deter the engagement of new members, and silence difference rather than celebrating it as a source of unexpected opportunities to expand interests or activities. Without changes of direction, groups often become stale and membership may fall off through a perceived lack of action and consequent boredom. Palmer points out that:

Those who uncritically celebrate community participation then often fail to recognise how important are the outsiders and strangers in prompting people to get involved. Opposition to and disaffection with what Durkheim called the profane, is what often prompts most people to take a more active part in political processes. The profane may take the form of a political party, business interests, illegal immigrants or some other threat to community life.⁸

Davison⁹ mourns the institutionalising of the environment in keeping with the current government ethos of commodifying problems such as water quality, salinity and land degradation, and the subsequent top down solutions designed to encourage people to care such as Land-care and Lend the Land a Hand. Despite this regulation of community effort, the environment remains a drawcard for community activism. In chapter 8 Lee and Maddock, and chapter 9 Hallen and Frith discuss great examples of what groups can achieve through concerted organised efforts, shared goals, and clever use of political lobbying and media coverage. The successful community-based challenge to development at

Mauds Landing on the Ningaloo Reef is another example of people power influencing planning decisions. However, there is a need for continued vigilance to ensure that once these issues have faded from the public eye, undesirable developments or relaxed logging rules do not slip through unnoticed. Sustainability requires that all aspects of a particular issue are taken into account—social, economic and environmental—when making far-reaching decisions. All too often, pragmatism interferes with this process and important values are traded off in return for a minimal lip service to the sustainability ideal.

The WA Department of Planning and Infrastructure has demonstrated a laudable commitment to addressing controversial planning issues through community engagement processes.¹⁰ This innovation has not been universally supported by all stakeholders in particular processes, especially when decisions go against their preferred outcome, and some question the need for governments to consult on such a large scale prior to making decisions. To some extent, this unease with being asked to listen to other points of view or to offer an opinion on matters outside the individual's immediate lifestyle reflects the dominant acceptance of autocratic government decision-making processes in the past, and the diminished sense of personal capacity to affect change. It is to be hoped that engagement processes continue into the future between government and community stakeholders, and also between and across the various silos constructed by government departments around their particular fiefdoms.

There are no stories in this book about rural communities, as such. The image of a thriving rural town can represent for some the epitome of what sustainable communities can achieve with an active group of volunteers running various community organisations, sporting groups and manning the volunteer fire brigade. Some also play an active role in local and regional government, and as representatives of rural industry and sustainable agriculture organisations. However, the downturn in the rural economy due to drought and bad seasons has resulted in many farming families having one partner working outside the farm to supplement their income. As people move off the land, farms are becoming bigger and worked by fewer people. In some cases, farming

families have moved to the city to provide educational and work opportunities, and the management of the farm is on a drive in–drive out basis¹¹. This has implications for the health of rural towns with a consequent reduction in the volunteer base, exacerbated by the fact that many existing volunteers are getting older and renewal by a younger cohort is not occurring. Thus it is clear that many of the issues affecting community activity in the city—sense of social isolation and diminished wellbeing, double income families, and lack of time—also play a role in the country. This is a topic worthy of further investigation.

The stories in this book reflect an optimism that communities can both 'do it for themselves' and feel empowered to be active citizens in political processes that will affect the future of our society. It is to be hoped that efforts to revive and nurture wellbeing through increasing awareness in the wider community that such avenues exist will ensure the revival and reinforcement of sustainable communities.