

"BACKYARD BUSHCARE" - A NEW MODEL FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The Backyard Bushcare Program is a new approach in biodiversity protection from Great Lakes Council. Faced with protecting and enhancing a valuable strip of bushland caught between the Forster township and the ocean, it has become increasingly clear to Council that we need the community on board and actively involved.

It is also becoming clear that behaviour changes needed for environmental protection amongst the general community do not come about through simple information drives alone. Influencing people's knowledge and attitudes is often not enough to see the desired "on-ground" changes. The missing link in many environmental engagement programs has often been the social aspect. While this is understandable for a number of reasons, it unfortunately means that the biggest influencing factor on people's behaviour is passed over.

Great Lakes Council's Backyard Bushcare Program is an attempt to put the learnings of Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM), Changeology, the Diffusion of Innovation and other research fields into practical action in a real world community. As this program is different to any undertaken by Great Lakes Council in the past, the learnings gained as we progress with it not only feed back in to influence the future of the Backyard Bushcare Program, they will also be used to inform future projects.

Background

The Backyard Bushcare program is part of the larger weed control project "Enhancing ecosystem resilience and protecting biodiversity in the Great Lakes", funded by the Australian Government's Biodiversity Fund. This project is jointly managed by Great Lakes Council (GLC) and National Parks and Wildlife (NPWS), and is being rolled out between 2012 and 2017.

The partnership between GLC and NPWS on this project operates in recognition of the cross-tenure nature of the weed invasion issue and the close collaboration needed to tackle it effectively. In line with this understanding, the Backyard Bushcare aspect of the larger project aims to address weeds on private land as this has been an important source of weed infestation in bushland, both historically and in an ongoing sense.

Over 1,100 private properties in east Forster were inspected for environmental and Noxious weed species in 2013. The information gathered during these inspections was used to help develop the Backyard Bushcare program, and the inspected properties are receiving particular focus in the program roll-out.

The data from these inspections give us a base-line to work from, and it is hoped that undertaking private property inspections in the same area toward the end of the Backyard Bushcare Program will give insight into the effectiveness of the program, both over-all and on an individual species level.

Behaviour change and the need for social diffusion

Simple information drives have been shown to have limited effectiveness when it comes to influencing behaviour change (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). The intention behind the Backyard Bushcare program is to incorporate information-sharing with community building to help create a cultural and behavioural shift.

People are far more likely to modify their own behaviour as a result of witnessing the behaviour of their peers than as a result of being told by a perceived "authority" that this is something they must do (Robinson, 2013). The majority of people change behaviours as a result of peer to peer diffusion via social networks through conversations and witnessing behaviours.

To create meaningful and long-lasting behaviour change in a community, you need to shift "social norms". Social norms come about through all of us witnessing one another's behaviours or having conversations and thereby learning what is or is not done. We are deeply social animals whose survival or otherwise has depended on group cohesion and inclusion for millions of years and social norms continue to have a far greater and deeper influence on all of us than we realise.

Whilst sometimes frustratingly slow for would-be influencers, social norms can and do change for environmental benefit. Relatively recent examples include household recycling, picking up after dogs and installing solar panels. While no behaviours have total social penetration, in many Australian communities these days you would be considered unusual if, for example, you undertook no household recycling.

These broad-reaching changes in community behaviour, or "cultural shifts", do not come about purely as a result of rules and regulations. Even when new laws or similar act as a catalyst for behaviour change, what really makes it stick is that deep-down sense of "this is what you do".

Due to personality and other factors (such as personal history and socio-economic status), individuals also adopt new behaviours at very different rates and for very different reasons. This is explored in the work regarding the "Diffusion of Innovations" (Robinson, 2013). Generally, the members of any group or community will be spread along a bell curve from "innovators" through "early adopters", "early majority" and "late majority" all the way to "laggards".

Besides the innovators, for whom something being a new idea can be reason enough to give it a go, almost all of these sectors are most strongly influenced in the adoption of new behaviours by witnessing and interacting with their peers, and by how they want to be perceived themselves.

It is with all this in mind that the Forster Backyard Bushcare Program has been designed. It is becoming increasingly clear that to influence the behaviour of individuals you need to work with existing communities, and work to help create stronger community ties. A neighbour pointing out a plant in someone's garden and saying "did you know that's a weed?" is far more effective than a brochure from Council.

In order to promote this diffusion and create new social norms, the Backyard Bushcare Program has as much as possible involved events and communications designed to foster a sense of community and get people talking amongst their neighbours and friends.

An additional advantage to approaching an ecological program from a community building and engagement point of view is also helping to break down barriers between

Councils and their residents. Councils are often seen as authoritarian and this can and often does result in people reacting negatively to information regarding what they should or should not do. Creating opportunities for one-on-one interaction in which people feel they can ask questions and receive personalised advice helps to break down these psychological barriers.

The fact that this level of community engagement is usually missed out of environmental education programs is understandable, as many people with an environmental background aren't community engagement specialists, many projects need to "hit the ground running" once funding is acquired and don't have scope for more experimental or adaptive aspects, and it is far easier to measure and report on numbers of brochures printed than community behaviour changes and true environmental outcomes. This means, however, that the single largest influencing factor on behavioural change goes untapped.

Activities of the Forster Backyard Bushcare Program

Weed, Wine & Dine Evenings

The idea to run a "Weed, Wine and Dine" evening to launch the Backyard Bushcare Program was inspired by a similar event run by Angourie Community Coastcare in the Clarence Valley. Just as with the Angourie Coastcare evening, the Weed, Wine and Dine concept proved to be extremely popular. Over forty people had to be turned away from the first evening and a second was held to cater to community interest.

The owners and residents of the East Forster properties inspected in 2013 were invited to attend an evening to hear about local biodiversity, weeds, and what they could do in their own gardens to benefit the local environment. Andrew Staniland (Parks Manager), Terry Inkson (Weeds Officer), Matt Bell (Ecologist), and Helen Kemp (Assistant Environmental Officer) from Great Lakes Council all spoke, as well as Rachel Kempers from NPWS (Great Lakes area) and Janusz Haschek from the One Mile Dunecare Group. Dinner was provided, and a glass of wine offered in exchange for people bringing in a weed from their garden.

After presentations were made and a panel-style Q and A, attendees had the opportunity to mingle with the presenters, ask for specific advice, look at freshly-cut examples of the worst weeds in Forster, sign the Bushland Friendly Garden pledge in exchange for a native plant, and chat with their neighbours.

This format worked extremely well, with most people staying on for discussion after the presentations, and Council receiving some great feedback. The idea behind running a different style of event like the Weed, Wine and Dine evenings was not only to attract more than "the usual suspects", but also to create some buzz in the community and get people talking.

Bushland Friendly Gardens Pledge

As part of the Backyard Bushcare program, community members are invited to sign a pledge stating that they will:

1. Remove all Noxious weeds as soon as they appear
2. Control all environmental weeds
3. Plant local natives when they can, and

4. Not dump any garden waste in bushland

In exchange for signing this pledge at a Backyard Bushcare event, people are given a free native plant as well as one or two "Proud to have a Bushland Friendly Garden" stickers.

Pledges have been shown to be an effective way to influence people's behaviour (McKenzie-Mohr). Compared to simply passing along information, asking people to make a commitment to undertake a small number of specific actions is a clear direction for people and therefore far more likely to see follow-through. The effectiveness of pledges is increased greatly by visibility, i.e. people feeling that their peers have in some way witnessed their commitment.

The Bushland Friendly Garden stickers, designed to be placed on fences, letterboxes, wheelie bins, cars etc. are designed to increase the visibility of both individuals who have made the pledge, as well as the broader Backyard Bushcare program, and the concept of gardening to benefit the environment generally.

Biodiversity Hub

To maximise the impact of limited program resources, it was decided to select a particular area of East Forster to focus on. The Biodiversity Hub concept is intended to both create some buzz in the community around the Backyard Bushcare program, and the issue of invasive weeds more broadly. Focussing resources on around 30 properties allows for much more individual attention, and is also an opportunity to foster a sense of community based around protecting the local environment amongst a discreet "cluster" of properties.

The first attempt at rolling out the Biodiversity Hub model has been a collection of approximately 30 private properties in an area just south of One Mile Beach. Called the South One Mile Biodiversity Hub, this area was selected on the basis of a higher than average prevalence of weeds, and the fact that it is located between two bushland reserves.

A low response rate in this area highlights the need to take many factors into account when selecting areas to focus on for this style of community building activity.

"Big Bad Three" campaign

The decision to focus on *Asparagus* spp., *Cassia* and *Ochna* in the "Big Bad Three" promotional campaign was based on the data gathered during the 2013 inspections.

Generally, people find it far easier to remember and engage with a smaller number of items or issues, rather than dozens, and these three weed species were the most commonly in the area. The next two species in terms of frequency, Fishbone Fern and Indian Hawthorn are (currently) lower priority in terms of bushland protection in the Forster area. *Asparagus* spp., *Cassia* and *Ochna* also each have the advantage of being quite distinctive and relatively easily identifiable.

The distinctive "Wanted" style posters of the Big Bad Three campaign were designed to be eye catching and distinctive, and to look very different from a "standard" Council information campaign.

Weed Bulletin emails

Sent out every month, each Bulletin details a particular weed, including identification, control and replacement information. Each email contains a wealth of information on each weed species, with multiple close-up and in-situ pictures, and videos demonstrating identification and control. The Bulletins are timed to coincide with flowering or other time of easy identification for the weed species covered.

The format of describing a single weed in each email was deliberately chosen to increase the chances of people becoming very familiar with and remembering each species. The amount and variety of information provided in each Bulletin allows people the chance to "go deeper" with their understanding of the issue of invasive species.

Presentation to Primary School students

A 20 minute presentation: "*Backyard Bushcare - what's happening in your backyard?*" was given to two groups of approximately 35 students from Forster Public School. A simplified message was delivered with lots of illustrative images about what makes a garden "wildlife friendly", what habitat is, and why native wildlife needs to be provided habitat in urban areas.

The presentation was very well received by the students, with a lot of interaction, ideas and responses to questions. Breaking the Backyard Bushcare message down to its simplest form and posing questions such as "what is habitat and why is it important?" proved to be an interesting exercise in making no assumptions and tailoring messages for your audience.

A parent of one of the children the next day said that her son had come home saying "do we have any of these plants?" and showed her the "Big Bad Three" posters.

Successes and learnings

The most outstanding success of the Backyard Bushcare program to date has been the Weed, Wine and Dine evenings, which proved to be extremely popular and generated fantastic feedback. From attendees' comments, it was clear that the format of the evening was greatly appreciated, including a lot of interesting information delivered in a short space of time, the chance to speak one-on-one with the "experts" in a relaxed setting, and a more "adult" atmosphere with wine and finger food provided, as well as being a great opportunity to mingle with neighbours.

Good responses to the evenings were also attributed to sending out eye-catching personalised invitations. Many aspects of the Backyard Bushcare Program have deliberately been designed to look very different to standard Council publications in order to pique interest and encourage discussion.

Undertaking a program like Backyard Bushcare, which is in many ways experimental, necessarily results in some activities being more successful than others. Of course, the less successful aspects of the program offer invaluable opportunities to learn and to adapt future activities.

There are a large number of factors involved in the success or otherwise of different aspects of a program like Backyard Bushcare. It has become very clear that social factors very much need to be taken into account when planning events for particular areas. Certain parts of Forster, especially along the coastal strip where Backyard Bushcare has been focussed, are dominated by properties that have non-residential owners (i.e. they are holiday homes or rentals). This understandably has a big impact on the amount of engagement and community building possible in those areas.

The Future

The future of Backyard Bushcare in Forster

The Forster Backyard Bushcare Program is an ongoing work in progress, as we try different ideas and learn and adapt as we go along. This experimental, adaptive approach means we are able to respond to community engagement and learn lessons that are applicable to other community programs undertaken by Council.

Lessons have been learnt from the Biodiversity Hub trial, and the model will be adapted and rolled out in other areas.

Rolling out the Backyard Bushcare model in other areas

The Great Lakes covers a large area with numerous small towns, including those identifying as coastal, urban and rural. The community structure, the priority weeds being tackled, and the funding available to roll out a similar program would be highly variable between areas and must be carefully considered in the planning process.

The research and planning undertaken as background to developing the Backyard Bushcare Program for the Forster area has been done so with the intention of the findings being relevant and applicable to many other towns and areas within the Great Lakes LGA and further afield. It is hoped that a number of elements of the Backyard Bushcare Program will soon be rolled out in the Hawks Nest community after private property weed inspections were carried out in 2014.

The process and experience of undertaking Backyard Bushcare style programs in different communities will continue to increase our knowledge and understanding around what does and does not work in community engagement and influencing on-ground behaviour change.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly clear that traditional boundaries, between governmental departments and between the disciplines of environmental management and community engagement, need to be broken down to achieve the ecological outcomes that we need.

Just as weeds spread happily across land tenures, people and the way they choose to manage their land do not exist in a vacuum. First and foremost people are members of communities and their behaviour reflects this. To effectively influence behaviours for the benefit of the environment a whole-of-community approach is required.

Because this is such a different way of addressing ecological issues, innovative, adaptive and experimental programs along the lines of the Backyard Bushcare program are the best way forward.

A lot can be learnt from other similar programs, but at the end of the day the only true test of a program's effectiveness and what will or will not work is to start talking to people and trialling different options in your own community.

References

McKenzie-Mohr, D. (2011). *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour: an introduction to Community Based Social Marketing* (3rd ed.). Canada: New Society Publishers.

Robinson, L. (2013). *Changeology: Program design for social change*. Workbook notes from Changeology workshop.