

## **Powerful partnerships: involving community in managing natural resources**

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### **Introduction**

Community support is essential for the conservation of natural resources. Governments may establish protected areas, but if people living adjacent are unsupportive of the protected area concept it will have limited chance of success. Protected area agencies need to establish dialogue with the community on park management principles while providing opportunity for input into park management (Byrne 1999). Establishment of partnerships with communities is now viewed as a priority within protected area agencies with a wide range of mechanisms available to achieve this (Worboys *et al.* 2001). The benefits of involving community and creating partnerships are significant eg. reducing alienation, avoiding conflict, building support for local programs and contributing to community education (Worboys *et al.* 2001). Participatory and adaptive approaches are influential components of natural resource management planning providing greater participation and benefit from the inclusion of local knowledge (Dovers 1997).

With a few exceptions, the management of protected areas in Australia is the responsibility of state governments. The Commonwealth Government has a role with parks with international obligations such as World Heritage and Ramsar listing. The South Australian Government passed the *National Parks and Wildlife Act* in 1971 and the following year established the National Parks and Wildlife Service to manage the states parks (Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory 2002). At present, parks come under the jurisdiction of the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH). In the past, policy and management plans were developed, distributed and defended by the policy makers (Worboys *et al.* 2001). Today, the need to involve communities in this process is widely accepted and a goal within the current DEH Corporate Plan is to

*“foster debate on the environment and engage the community”*. Community involvement is an integral part of park management in South Australia, from the development of park management plans through to support for park managers in implementing programs of works.

Naracoorte Caves National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1994 for the extensive fossil deposits found within the caves of the park. The park is located on the Caves Range within the South East of South Australia, more than three hours travel from two large population centres of Adelaide and Melbourne. It is the major tourist attraction in the region, attracting over 70,000 visitors each year and has had close ties with local people for over 160 years. This paper presents several examples of partnerships including formal consultative committees, Friends of Parks groups, youth development programs and partnerships in tourism and land management. These will be discussed using examples from the Naracoorte Caves National Park (NP).

### **Framework for community participation**

- The conservation of natural resources for a sustainable future is not the sole responsibility of the government. Success requires leadership from within the community, responsibility and active participation. The Department for Environment and Heritage recognises this need, with agency priorities including;
- Continuing to build on working relationships with other government agencies, local government, Natural Resource Management Boards and other regional or community groups and businesses to achieve mutual objectives.
- Developing a program that better engages educators and students in schools, and

targeted community sectors in environmental education.

- Examining and adopting innovative ways of working with others to deliver improved results.

### **Management planning**

Each South Australian parks managed by DEH has a plan of management. In developing these plans, input is sought from the community. The level of consultation depends on the size of the park, significance of values and factors that may affect these values and the number of stakeholders with an interest in the park. Public forums are a method sometimes used, but may be limited in their effectiveness if meetings are dominated by a vocal minority.

Community reference groups may be established with participants representing each stakeholder group. These are particularly effective in sourcing information that is then integrated into the planning process by a Planning Officer to achieve agency goals. Once a draft plan of management is formulated, it is then circulated for public comment for three months. Only after all representations are considered is the plan then adopted and implemented for a park. By seeking community participation, both formally and informally in the planning process, DEH is able to increase community support for land that it manages and achieve its objectives. To assist with the implementation of management plans, further participation is invited through a variety of different groups.

### **Consultative Committees**

Consultative committees were established by the South Australian Government in 1980 to provide a mechanism by which members of the community could provide feedback on park management issues. This was timely, following what has been described as “the blackest years when the Government thought it could ‘go it alone’” (Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory 2002). In 1891, the first National Parks Act was passed and a voluntary Board of Commissioners established to run the Belair National Park, acknowledged as the second oldest National Park in Australia. After the introduction of the *National Parks and Wildlife*

*Act* in 1971 and the creation of the National Parks Service, the Board of Commissioners was dismissed and there was suddenly no community voice in the management of Belair National Park. The lack of opportunity for public participation led to distrust and antagonism towards the government, and a lack support for the National Parks system (Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory 2002). Consultative Committees were created as a way of once again allowing community involvement with park management. Today, there are 17 Consultative Committees providing input and voicing community concerns. Some of these are district committees consulting on parks within a geographical area, while others are specialist in nature such as a committee concerned with captive fauna.

### **Friends of Parks groups**

Friends of Parks groups were first established by DEH in South Australia in 1982. The organisation has grown to an impressive 132 groups in 2005 with about 7,000 volunteers working in parks. The concept has been enormously successful across the state, providing much needed human resources to complete work such as weed control, revegetation work, restorative works and interaction with park visitors. Friends of Parks do not replace paid staff, but rather supplement approved programs and projects to achieve better park management and at the same time creating community “ownership”.

Forums are held every two years where members of groups from around the state come together to view projects undertaken by the host group, for social interaction and to allow DEH to provide recognition for projects of excellence and outstanding contributions. These events are attended by DEH Directors, with awards presented by the Minister for Environment and Conservation, providing a clearly demonstrable link between government and community.

### **Youth Involvement**

Community partnerships often focus on retired people who have the time to commit to conservation, but younger people are a valuable resource that should not be overlooked. Green Corps is a Commonwealth Government youth

initiative for 17-20 year olds. Projects are designed to preserve, protect and restore natural and cultural heritage and are built around three pillars ie. youth development, environmental and heritage benefit and working with communities. The program offers youth the opportunity to gain real life work experience and receive training at the same time assisting the host agency to realise conservation objectives. The added benefit for Naracoorte Caves is that most participants are from the local community, strengthening our role in education and training. Green Corps programs have yielded enormous benefits for Naracoorte Caves NP, achieving results beyond what can be achieved with regular staff and assisting many local youth in achieving full time employment at the conclusion of the project. The result is Naracoorte Caves has achieved expanded conservation objectives and increased the support of the local community.

### **Beyond the Protected Area Boundaries**

While it is important to involve the community in protected area management, it is equally important to influence how the community behaves on non-protected areas. To achieve this, a strong understanding of community interactions and good communication are essential. People must first be aware of conservation issues and be in a position to rectify or reverse underlying causes of problems. Economic restrictions, lack of knowledge and making conservation issues relevant to landholders are the greatest barriers. The management agency may be able to assist with funds or sourcing of funds, provide advice on protection or restoration of natural resources and communicate issues to gain community support.

In Australia, Natural Resource Management Plans have been developed on a regional basis to provide a strategic framework for the integrated management of natural resources. Fundamental to the successful implementation of these plans will be engaging the community as cumulative impacts of individual actions will determine the future condition of the environment. Management agencies have a critical role to play engaging the community and providing levels of understanding and support (South East Natural Resource Consultative Committee 2003).

In the South East of South Australia, less than 13% of native vegetation remains and of this, less

than half is under the management of environmental agencies (Croft *et al* 1999). Over 600 caves have been documented within the region and of these only 26 are protected within the Naracoorte Caves NP. With such a small percentage of land left in its natural state and the majority not under formal protection and management, it becomes critical to have the cooperation of government agencies, local landholders and the entire community to achieve effective environmental management. The South East Natural Resource Management Plan (SENRM Plan) (2003) has been developed to provide a framework, integrating economic, environmental and social objectives. Its goal for capacity building is “*To ensure that the South East community is motivated, capable and has the capacity to achieve natural resource management outcomes, which benefit the economic, environmental and social wellbeing of the region*”. Landholders within the Naracoorte Caves NP area have been engaged to contribute to several goals of the SENRM Plan including protection and re-establishment of native vegetation and protection of caves.

### **Partnerships in action: examples from Naracoorte Caves National Park**

#### **Friends of Naracoorte Caves**

The Friends of Naracoorte Caves group was formed in December 2002 and immediately attracted a large following. It is now the second largest such group in South Australia. Naracoorte Caves NP is the perfect park for a Friends group, with a wide variety of opportunities including assisting scientific research, visitor interaction, supporting community events, working with local landholders for better landscape management and supporting management with the provision and maintenance of visitor infrastructure.

The Friends of Naracoorte Caves has assisted with many projects, but one will have a lasting impact on the conservation of an endangered species of bat, the Southern Bentwing Bat (*Miniopterus bassanii*). Many caves around the South East region of South Australia have been used as convenient sites for the dumping of rubbish. Some of these caves are also wintering sites for the Southern Bentwing Bat and the rubbish had rendered the cave unsuitable as bat habitat. The

Friends of Naracoorte Caves secured funding through a Federal Government program to restore two of these caves to their original condition. A car body and many years of household and agricultural waste were removed from Cave Park Cave (Naracoorte), possibly the most important bat wintering site in the whole region. The project is nearing completion with the entrance to the cave fenced in preparation for the establishment of native vegetation. The landowner, initially hesitant at the project and fencing his land for conservation, has now established several other corridors of vegetation. This property now provides a valuable extension to the Naracoorte Caves NP with links of vegetation across the property for fauna and secure bat wintering habitat.

Naracoorte Caves NP has the highest visitation of any attraction in the South East region. However, many within the local community were of the opinion that the local township was missing out on the benefits because many visitors did not visit the town after visiting the park. In agreement with the park manager and in cooperation with local business and tourism group, the Friends of Naracoorte Caves built a small information wall on the park and installed maps and signage. The wall is a focal point for visitors and has strengthened the relationship between the park and local community.

### **Green Corps**

Green Corps projects completed during the past three years have facilitated long-term management objectives for assisted Naracoorte Caves NP by things that may not have been possible in normal circumstances. Victoria Fossil Cave is the premier cave in the Naracoorte Caves NP and central to the World Heritage listing. It was first developed for tourism in 1897 and then extended in 1969 when extensive fossil deposits were found. The final work was completed in 1996. In each of these developments, passages were enlarged to provide easy access for visitors. Green Corps teams have removed over 100 cubic metres of rubble, making the cave safer for visitors, improving the cave's aesthetics and even locating further fossils.

Elsewhere in the region, a Green Corps team removed rubbish from Joanna Bat Cave, a cave on private land used by bats as wintering habitat.

Over 30 tonnes of agricultural and household waste was removed by hand, with most materials recycled. Bats are now using the cave after a long absence, further expanding the range of available habitat and building on the work of the Friends of Naracoorte Caves group.

Naracoorte Caves NP is located on the Caves Range, where native vegetation is fragmented but providing essential habitat for the survival of several threatened species of birds and mammals. Green Corps teams have established corridors of native vegetation linking remnant areas, creating a continuous habitat along the range. This project has influenced local landowners to become involved, further increasing the value of the Green Corps work.

### **Caves Range biodiversity corridor**

The Caves Range re-vegetation project has been a cooperative project between DEH and FSA. Most of the on-ground work has been completed by Green Corps, but the project has stimulated the interest of adjoining landowners who wish to become involved in conservation of native vegetation. Promotion of the project by DEH has encouraged landowners to create corridors of native vegetation on their own land, further enhancing the ecological value of the land. A neighbouring wine company has recently approached Naracoorte Caves NP management seeking to establish a partnership, initially offering to provide machinery and labour for weed control in native vegetation on park and adjoining land. Such a partnership will be of enormous benefit to landscape management, achieving environmental objectives and community involvement.

### **Protecting important fossil sites**

The majority of the best fossil deposits found to date in the South East of South Australia lie within the caves of the Naracoorte Caves NP. However, a significant number occur on private land and this number is increasing as new caves are discovered, most often during vineyard developments. World Heritage listing of Naracoorte Caves NP created some uncertainty with neighbouring landholders who had caves on their land. They were unsure of what World Heritage listing meant and had concerns that if

caves or fossil sites were found on their land, they may lose it to be added to the World Heritage Area. Some caves and potential fossil sites were destroyed rather than allowing access for investigation until a major breakthrough was achieved in 1999, when a small cave with a significant fossil deposit was discovered during vineyard preparation. The owner allowed access for a short period during which all fossil material retrieved. A television story and several written articles were produced highlighting what had been achieved through cooperation. After this demonstration that land was not in danger of being compulsorily acquired, many more caves have been investigated, with several yielding significant fossil material that has contributed to our understanding of the fossil history of the region. This highlights the need to have the support and trust of local landholders, so they feel comfortable in notifying authorities of new caves and do so with the knowledge their land is safe from compulsory acquisition. In all cases to date it has been possible to protect the caves without impacting on land use and development with DEH staff providing advice on how best to protect sites and assisting with the installation of infrastructure.

### **Tourism**

Naracoorte Caves NP is the premier tourist attraction in the South East of South Australia, with world class infrastructure complementing the natural assets of the park. A major development took place in 1998 with the construction of the Wonambi Fossil Centre, a visitor centre housing a display that recreates the past based on the fossil record found in the park's caves. Local government (Naracoorte Lucindale Council) could see the value for the region with the development and provided support with road construction and carparks. They continue to be a strong supporter of Naracoorte Caves NP, assisting with many community events.

Naracoorte Lucindale Council are involved in a partnership with Naracoorte Caves NP that includes the South Australian Museum and corporate sponsors. Each year, the Museum visits Naracoorte Caves NP on a roadshow, bringing Museum exhibits and staff to the region. This provides opportunities for local school children and the community to participate in Museum

activities that are normally only available in the capital city.

Tourism at Naracoorte Caves NP has provided opportunities for local business development with visitation increasing from under 40,000 to over 70,000 per year after the opening of the Wonambi Fossil Centre. Several new accommodation businesses have been established and partnerships have been created where operators include Naracoorte Caves NP in their promotion and in return receive promotion at Naracoorte Caves NP. These partnerships achieve many times the promotion Naracoorte Caves NP or the operators could achieve alone.

Transport operators have developed packages that include activities at Naracoorte Caves NP. One operator has developed a package that includes adventure caving at Naracoorte Caves NP. Assistance was provided with development of promotional materials, which the operator distributes around Australia. Additional promotion and extra visitors are key outcomes for Naracoorte Caves NP, while the operator benefits from the expertise in advertising attracting extra customers.

### **Conclusion**

Working with the community is a powerful tool for environmental management and many methods to include communities in decision-making have been developed. Effective community partnerships and involvement may be achieved by observing the following principles.

- Effective protected area management requires community support.
- The local community must be considered from the commencement of the management process.
- Environmental agencies must understand the local community and be a part of it to achieve effective protected area management.
- Effective communication with the community is an integral component of protected area management.
- Interpretation is a means of communicating to the community the heritage values of protected areas. Interpretation can therefore be used to facilitate conservation outcomes

by promoting understanding and appreciation in the community.

(Adapted from Worboys *et al* 2003)

At Naracoorte Caves NP, the Department for Environment and Heritage has been able to gain the support of the local community to achieve positive environmental outcomes, from protection of caves for fossils and bats to establishing native vegetation corridors for improved fauna habitat. A strong Friends of Naracoorte Caves group, an active Consultative Committee and the involvement of local businesses along with an understanding of the role the community has had in the development of Naracoorte Caves NP over 160 years contribute to a positive partnership between the park and community.

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