

Incorporating Community into Research

Lewis Kahn^{1*}, Millie Nicholls², Judi Earl¹ and Kylie Nicholls²

¹ *Agricultural Information & Monitoring Services, 625 Cluny Rd, Armidale, NSW 2350*

² *Mid-North Grasslands Working Group, PO Box 12, Brinkworth, South Australia 5464*

** Contact author on email: lewiskahn@bigpond.com*

INTRODUCTION

Most grasslands in the mid-north of South Australia have been managed conservatively for the past decades, or longer, and in many instances soil conservation has been a primary goal. Paradoxically, this management regimen has created less stable herbaceous communities, dominated by introduced annual grasses, often at the expense of native perennial grasses. These changes in vegetation composition are profound and are represented on vast areas in the mid-north of South Australia but yet were incidental outcomes of land and stock management. Recognizing that incidental outcomes of management regimens can have substantial on-ground impact is the key to increasing native perenniality in these grasslands and ensuring this process is farmer-driven.

A traditional approach to increasing native perenniality and stability in grasslands is to gather the results of replicated quantitative research and develop programs to extend this knowledge to industry leaders, innovators and early adopters, and wait for the trickle down effect. Remaining focused at all times on the goal of increasing native perenniality.

An alternative approach to increasing native perenniality, and one the authors have used in the project described in this paper, is to promulgate strategies that address the primary concerns of farmers but deliver the incidental benefit of increased perenniality. The challenge to consultants and extension personnel is to devise such win win strategies in partnership with farmers. A case study of such an approach is detailed in this paper.



OWNERSHIP OF THE PROBLEM AND THE KEY ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

Farmers notoriously place a large emphasis on their peers as a source of new information and practices. There is merit in this approach because it provides the opportunity for farmers to evaluate a new technology in an environment that is commercially relevant at no risk! Because of this tendency to place a priority on the knowledge of peers, programs driving a change in practice are ideally driven by farmers.

During the 1990s a group of farmers in the mid-north of South Australia developed the idea that grasslands could be better managed to improve both their conservation and profitability. These farmers formed the Mid North Grasslands Working Group (MNGWG), coopted state government representatives, and were successful in obtaining funding, through the Natural Heritage Trust, to tackle the issue of grassland management. The formation of the MNGWG, under the guidance of local farmers, provided the project with credibility. While this approach is essential to foster ownership among the target community on its own it is not unique nor sufficient to ensure a change in practice. Four further elements are required, namely, farmers committed to the project goal/s, capital support, technical expertise and on-ground demonstration.

THE VALUE OF THE TESTIMONY AND TRUST

The human component is the first element of change. The human component of any conservation or land management programme is critical to the success of the programme, and yet is rarely talked about when projects are discussed. The focus is on physical outcomes—trees planted, kilometres of fencing, regeneration success, or number of people attending field days or seminars. The real success is in winning the hearts and minds of the land managers, of achieving long term commitment to those important on ground outcomes—and achieving and measuring this type of success is no easy task.

The most difficult part of any programme is selecting farmers to participate in a programme. These farmers are future role models in the region and vital to establishing change in the wider community. How are they to be selected? And how do these farmers contribute to the project outcomes and outputs? In terms of selection, the community based person has some advantages and disadvantages. A major advantage is that community members understand families and family support and these are key elements in determining long-term commitment to the programme. A potential disadvantage is exposure to unfair and unwarranted prejudices.

A lot of literature talks about selecting the innovators and early adopters—the people who are prepared to stand out of the crowd and take a chance. However, it is not always easy to pick these people, even in your own community. With the MNGWG project,

seven farmers on seven properties were selected to act as demonstration sites for rotational grazing. The farmers ranged in age from 28 to 60, and were mostly known to be open minded and held in generally high regard in the district. After three years, the oldest farmer, who initially appeared to be least likely to succeed, was the most successful participant, and one of the youngest farmers has achieved no improvement in either his grassland or his management skills. The key factor with the most successful participant has been the individual's willingness to learn, the enthusiasm with which he embraced the concept, and his ability to recognise and build on his on-ground success. The lowest achiever has been battling with the older generation who, although not directly involved with the management of his land, managed to destroy his confidence in the new system that he was trialling just enough to ensure that real change did not occur.

The successful farmers have each developed skills beyond those required for the programme and acted to guide future programme directions and establish research priorities by highlighting 'weak links' in local management systems. These farmers are also ambassadors or mentors in the wider community as neighbours and other farmers seek their opinion on the merit of the programme.

Trust, underpins the success of the programme and is developed in farmers and consultants through an iterative process based on technical and moral support and the accumulation of experience. Once established, trust allows the envelope of future possibilities to be more fully explored.

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Once participating farmers have joined the programme a key issue is that of defining programme goals and objectives: for it is these goals and objectives against which the success of the programme will ultimately be measured. The importance of establishing these goals prior to the start of a programme cannot be underplayed. This is the opportunity for resolving mutually exclusive goals and identifying the relative importance of programme goals with participants.

In the MNGWG, a key 'programme' goal was an increase in native perennial grasses yet for many farmers their key goal was to increase production and more importantly profitability. As consultants to the programme we made the decision to make perennality an incidental goal when discussing the programme with participating farmers. In no way did this reduce the importance of this outcome and in some ways it limited some management options. However, this decision allowed us to deliver management strategies that created an environment capable of supporting greater production while at the same time increasing perennality. In the early years of the project, this approach developed trust and it is fair to say that farmers focused largely on production outcomes. However, over time, these farmers came to recognise the value of the incidental outcomes as drivers of increased productivity. That farmers were allowed to make the link between perennality and productivity themselves and in the context of their farming situation ensured a genuine understanding: key elements for valued ambassadors.

CAPITAL SUPPORT

Prior to the development of trust and the emergence of programme ambassadors a major barrier for change is the funding of capital works. Financial incentives—even though they are often viewed as inadequate—provide the catalyst that is needed to overcome the inertia that stands in the way of making a good idea a reality! In grassland management, as in most other walks of life, it is money that makes the world go round!

While money makes the world go round, it is our experience that it helps if the money is somehow at arms length from “the Government”. Whether it is a deep rooted myth in the local community, or a hang over from the days when land was resumed for a variety of reasons, many farmers are very wary of accepting funding from a government source, as they have a suspicion that it means “the Government” will have some control over what they do on their farms. As a local person, working with a community group, that barrier is usually surmountable.

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

Technical personnel are a key part in developing new management approaches but to foster long-term ownership among participating farmers these personnel should not subsume the responsibility of success or failure on participating farms. The process to achieve this relies on the provision of principals and not recipes. Farmers must be allowed to take plastic principles and adapt these to their own situations. However, once on-farm management practices have been devised there is no replacement for being able to present and discuss local data. This means data collected from known farms in known years.

Farms are complex organisations and their custodians (ie. farmers) seldom reveal the full extent of this complexity until trust in the technical experts / consultant has been established. The process of building trust and understanding the complex system involves repeated social interactions. But understanding the complexity of the physical and social environment is an important role of the consultant. Without this understanding it is difficult for the farmer and consultant to interact in a meaningful way to develop new management approaches.

ON-GROUND DEMONSTRATION

The final element of change is the on-ground demonstration of new management regimens. These demonstrations allow farmers to integrate knowledge into their own farming practices. A key part of the demonstrations is their need to be commercial in scale to gain credibility and to provide a meaningful context for information.

CONCLUSION

Farming communities are willing to play an active role in research in the sense that the research process allows these communities to tackle relevant issues. However, success will be restricted largely to dealing with immediate and local goals. Other more incidental goals may also be achieved in the research process and there are occasions when relegation to incidental nature strengthens the chance of long-term success and community ownership.