

COMMUNITY INNOVATION

“Sustaining your community”



Australian Government
Cotton Research and
Development Corporation



Cotton Catchment Communities CRC



Australian Government
Rural Industries Research and
Development Corporation

FOREWORD

Sustaining rural communities is critical to Australia's agricultural industries. Rural communities are part of our nation's social fabric. All are diverse and all are unique, however they also have much in common in terms of opportunities and challenges.

In April 2010, the Cotton Catchment Communities CRC and Cotton Research and Development Corporation held the first 'Sustaining Rural Communities' Conference in Narrabri. The conference brought together groups including industry, researchers, councillors and community leaders to discuss the critical challenges facing rural communities. The emphasis was on coming up with tangible solutions rather than just talking about the problems. Feedback from delegates was overwhelmingly positive and it was decided at the conference that there needed to be further conferences to ensure the momentum and ideas generated from the first conference were not lost.

The second Sustaining Rural Communities Conference focused on ways individuals can action ideas to ensure their rural communities remain vibrant and viable amid changing economic, environmental and social issues, with the theme "Transforming Regional Australia".

The conference aimed to explore and provide solutions to the various issues that rural communities are facing including severe drought; significant changes in government policy especially those relating to water and carbon; and the mineral resources boom. All these issues have the potential to change the face of rural communities forever and providing these communities with the skills, knowledge and partnerships to manage change is vital.

This project undertook to document outcomes by compiling case studies from ideas and experiences of people from the second conference. These case studies explore solutions to the various issues that rural communities are facing and demonstrates there are fantastic ideas and viable solutions when people (and their organisations/ interest groups) work together to achieve common goals.

This booklet is targeted at individuals and groups with an interest in grass roots community development. The aim of these case studies is to illustrate how successful community ventures can rejuvenate, or add to a community or region. It is hoped others may learn from the experiences and successes of others who have moved to undertake community projects.

Disclaimer

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BOGGABRI DROVERS' CAMPFIRE



Introduction

Boggabri is located on one of the country's major highways – the Kamlaroi – and sits half way between Gunnedah and Narrabri in North West NSW. It is a (relatively) small community which now holds one of the largest events in the region – The Boggabri Drovers' Campfire, which (on last figures) sees the town nearly double in size from its usual population of just below 1000.

Hosted by the Boggabri Lions Club, the event is held at the local showground where people camp and enjoy classic country activities, delicious economical camp oven meals, campfire sing-a-longs, market stalls, shearing demonstrations, bush poetry, whip cracking and a community church service. Local tours are run to a cotton gin, coal mine and old homestead. Only locals are permitted to run stalls.

The event has gone from strength to strength, having kicked off in 2006 as a weekend event with just 27 vans attending. This year the attraction ran for nearly a week with around 360 vehicles rolled into town, equating to more than 750 visitors. In just four years the event became an Inland Tourism Award winner and Runner-up in 2011.

Impetus

The event is the brainchild of Boggabri cattle farmer and seasoned caravanner Geoff Eather who just "wanted to do something" to revitalise the town and inject some much needed cash into small business and community organisations.

Boggabri sees tens of thousands of travellers pass through every year, most perhaps without a second glance and the community or what it has to offer beyond what can be seen from the highway.

"Boggabri was struggling, like a lot of other country towns as was pointed out at the (Sustaining Rural Communities) Conference," Geoff says.

"Statistics say travellers spend an average of \$80 per day and I thought 'Why not tap into these caravans – but how do we pull them up?'"

The event is held in April to capture travellers/caravanners heading north from cooler to warmer climates, many of whom are retired or semi-retired.

Outcomes

The event is bringing positive social and economic benefit to the town and surrounds. It has been described by Narrabri Tourism as the premiere event of the shire.

Visitors patronise the stall holders and not-for-profit clubs at the event, while businesses in town also see an increase in turnover.

The community is brought together with a common aim to do something positive which breed morale and positivity.

"We have more and more people coming on board wanting to help out because they've seen the success of the event," Geoff said.

"Also, by adding new attractions each year – for example now we have an old machinery display – this draws more and different local involvement."

This year's expansion from a weekend attraction to run over a week has given greater benefit still, as visitors have longer to explore the district and spend.

While the main aim is to have the people of Boggabri benefit, growth means keeping the event open to local stall holders only is being reviewed, with the outcome to open to others in the region, but only if they don't compete with local input.

Return visitors make up a large proportion of visitors who "like the friendliness". Many now put it on their calendar, while a lot of business is incidental from passing travellers.

Another positive outcome has been educational.

Citysiders develop an empathy and understanding of rural life, both past and present, through the static and working displays and interaction with locals.



A semi-trailer is used to take visitors for a ride so they can appreciate the view of the truck driver with the aim to improve road safety and foster better relations between caravans and trucks. This initiative is very popular with the visitors.

Weeds education and identification is also on the agenda for next year. Many noxious or invasive weeds grow along sides of roads and at rest stops, thus the travelling community is in an ideal position to help identify, and thus eradicate devastating weeds such as parthenium, spread by travelling farm machinery. It also improves awareness of the ability for these individuals to make sure they do not also add to the spread via their own vehicles.

Tools

Geoff decided to use the strengths of the community, which is based along a major stock route, still used by drovers today. The region has a long history of primary production and holds one of the largest campdrafts in NSW annually.

The main tools needed to run this event are support from community and its groups to cater the event and provide attractions.

While enlisting the support of local media has been helpful, due to the nature of the travelling community, word of mouth has been a major source of advertising.

Being willing to ask for assistance from local government and tourism centres is crucial for this type of event, as this relationship is symbiotic.

Enlisting local organisations and clubs can prove invaluable as in this case with Narrabri Tourism, who has helped with promotion and support. Use local knowledge and experience and look closely at and consider visitor feedback carefully has been a winning formula for the Drovers' Campfire.

Advice to others

Once a winning formula is found, "stay the same but add new attractions each year," is Geoff Eather's advice.

"People come back because they enjoyed the experience, so keep the formula the same but do something different every year – people like to do new things as well as different things," he says.

Identifying your target group is an important first step as it governs the type, timing and location of the event as well as defining channels for media promotion. For example caravanning magazines and websites were the initial outlets, with expansion to broader media (with the help of Narrabri Tourism) to include seniors' publications, NRMA, and other motoring organisations. Building good relationships with local media is also important. Also make the event value for money.

"Camping fees are kept to a minimum, meals are economical and we feel that part of the attraction is to rough it a bit like drovers do," Geoff said

Many aspects for visitors comfort has been considered, with powered sites reserved for those with medical issues, and access to showers, toilets and water.

Government grants are an increasing form of support, and Geoff advises to "get someone to help with grants if you don't know how". A grant has allowed the Drovers' Campfire committee to employ someone on a casual basis to cover some administration duties, which have grown beyond the capacity of the organising committee.

Lack of start-up funds can stifle many wonderful ideas, but Geoff's advice is to "start small and work with what you've got – that's what we did because we (Lions) just didn't have the money to throw at it."



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FRIENDLY FACES HELPING HANDS

Introduction

Kelly Foran, a rural landholder and mother from Narrabri, Northern NSW has created the Friendly Faces Helping Hands Foundation to offer people from rural communities links to hospitals and health facilities in Australia's major cities.

This web-based central portal of information has been designed to help rural families who find themselves in a strange city with very little support at hand.

"I aimed to help people get through these tough times and alleviate some of the stress, worry and feelings of helplessness that occur when you go away to a strange large city for treatment, or to be with someone who is being treated," Kelly said.

"As if the news of illness or injury is not devastating enough, imagine the added strain of dealing with city life – finding accommodation, car parking, food, petrol, support services and other necessities in an unfamiliar and daunting city – and all at a moment's notice."

The website was launched in June 2010 and now covers hospitals Australia-wide.

Impetus

Kelly and her husband David were unexpectedly required to attend metropolitan hospitals several times over two years for family emergencies. They live six hours from both Brisbane and Sydney.

Kelly was first admitted to Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital after being diagnosed with a brain tumour, two weeks before giving birth to her first child. Later complications meant more unscheduled hospital visits. The following year, the family was immediately rushed to Brisbane when Kelly's young son was diagnosed with an eye tumour.

David and Kelly's fruitless search for a friendly face and helping hand in these crises prompted Kelly to offer rural Australians a unique and innovative new service that could significantly ease the burden of visiting a city hospital.

"We need information about businesses and services surrounding major hospitals, helping people find accommodation, car parking, petrol, groceries, cheap eats and even hair dressers," Kelly said.

"This website helps to minimise the overwhelming feelings of isolation and give people the power of information in these difficult times."

Links to social workers, support networks and counsellors are also needed and are on the website.

Kelly also hopes her website will help stop country people from falling victim to unexpectedly high city prices.

"My husband went for a haircut on our first trip to Brisbane and it cost him \$75. We also spent years paying \$17 a day for parking before finding a much cheaper car park around the corner," she said.



Kelly Foran has made it a personal quest to make life easier for country people in times of sickness.

Whilst investigating and researching for the website, FFHHF found that rural people are often bereft out of support systems. While there is a large number of support networks and resources available this information was found to be hard to access or inappropriately communicated by health services, so those in need never receive this vital information.

FFHHF found some consumers and carers knew about travel assistance, accommodation options and other support services at the beginning of their health care journey, some were told about support networks during their rehabilitation, long after they had travelled many times, or were not informed directly by health services.

Many more were not informed at all. "This is a story of ineffective communication and coordination between the government services and local consumers," Kelly says.

Tools

Helping others was a work in progress for four years before an IT specialist was contracted to build the website.

"With support, understanding and a great friend advising me to build the website and reassuring me that financial assistance will come, I created Friendly Faces Helping Hands," Kelly said.

"I needed to turn our experiences into a positive. For some reason we were given an insight into the workings of two health systems. We did it tough for no reason but ignorance."

Kelly says building the website had been an enormous feat, financially and time-wise, but well worth the effort.

“Every day we help someone and our goal was to help one person so even if it is small we have definitely achieved this.”

FFHHF has been developed from a consumer’s point of view, by people who have struggled personally and experienced the flaws in the present health system, by people who have no stake in healthcare but want to help, guide and advocate for others. FFHHF gives people back the power of information to give them more control of their situation.

“This project is also developed from a rural person’s point of view. We know first-hand the kind of information a rural person needs when they are in this situation,” Kelly says.

Outcome

FFHH is now helping more than 2000 people a month as well as answering calls for help or information by e-mail and phone. Kits have been developed and sold as a way of marketing the site and as an income stream for the foundation. The kits include; a rack card, business card or reference card and an explanation of Friendly Faces Helping Hands Foundation’s many uses and information areas. It is presented in a zip lock document case which is also designed to hold all receipts for IPTAS (Interstate Patient Travel Assistance Scheme).

To date 4000 of these have been sold and or donated and distributed to GPs and hospitals in NSW. Most of these kits have been purchased for HACC through councils and shires and distributed by clubs such as Lions and Inner Wheel. Regular country people are also purchasing kits to give to their doctors and specialists.

“A few weeks ago I was contacted by a lady in Western Australia whose son was involved in a car accident in North-West NSW and had been given a Friendly Faces Helping Hands kit. We were able to give her some accommodation information as she was flying from WA,” Kelly said.

“It does work and is vital for people’s mental health and sanity. By the end of 2012 I hope to have 25,000 kits in NSW alone this is at a cost of \$50,000.”

This project promotes rural Australians’ better health both physically and mentally by aiding them to:

- Be better informed; therefore be in a position to make better choices about their health care and their support services and facilities.
- Reduce their stress levels by having ease of access to information to make better decisions.
- Better utilise the support services available to them.
- Receive the information they need under the anonymity provided by an internet based service; therefore overcoming fear, pride and depression issues.
- Be able to return to their jobs, homes and communities more quickly and reduce their need to relocate as they are better informed about the support available to them at home as well.

All these factors compound to build healthier rural communities, as with the (above) recovery times are also improved.

Importantly, the website and phone service are not face-to-face, and Kelly has found the impersonal nature of the internet is an ideal medium for proud rural people, particularly farmers, who often find it hard to ask for help.

“They can access a helping hand without having to ask. This is integral in helping preserve people’s mental health, even when they are under stress, in an unfamiliar environment and without their usual community and local support networks,” Kelly explains.

Advice to others

Initial focus was to find an auspice group for FFHHF.

“This was very hard as a blank canvas is hard to sell, so my husband and I decided to just contract someone to build the site get the information out there and start helping people,” Kelly says.

Setting up a foundation and a social enterprise can be difficult as a board is required for transparency. In rural communities it can be very difficult to formalise this type of group, due to distances between farms/people and existing individuals’ commitments to work, family and farm life, which often stretches beyond the “nine to five”.

FFHH is unique as there is no other system at present which is a one-stop shop for all states and all services. FFHHF has no obligations or loyalties to any specific providers therefore the information is provided without bias.

However starting a unique innovation that does not fit into any existing ‘categories’ also has pitfalls.

“Getting our status as a deductible gift recipient (DGR) has been a nightmare as we do not fit any category. We are not specifically helping one type or disease so we are still struggling with this,” Kelly said.

Other advice is to source continuous funding and/or enlist help to write grant submissions, as this can become all-consuming and distract from the initial aims.

“I started FFHHF to help people. I now work six days a week trying to secure funding so that we can help people it all seems upside down and I struggle to continue the work I set out to do.”

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HAWKESBURY HARVEST

Introduction

Hawkesbury Harvest has established a range of consumer-direct market channels that allow small-holding farmers the opportunity to diversify their business model and develop alternative survival strategies. Harvest's initiatives shorten the value chain, re-build relationships between growers and consumers, and reinforce the importance and identity of regional agriculture to community.

The initiative began in 2000 with a map printed on a home computer detailing just 13 'basic' destinations in the Hawkesbury LGA. Today there are 80 quality destinations in the Hornsby, Hills, Hawkesbury, Penrith, Wollondilly, Kiama and Shoalhaven LGAs. The majority of destinations on the map provide farm gate experiences and the balance are complementary destinations such as restaurants using local food, B&Bs and farm stays. The emphasis is on agricultural viability and productivity.

Impetus

Farmers in the Hawkesbury, Sydney's traditional 'food bowl', were under threat from changed market structures and conditions, making existing production and marketing efforts unviable.

The general thrust in profitable agriculture was an industrial model, and many Sydney-region food producers were being left behind. Commodity prices were/are under constant downward pressure and some farmers could not afford to take their crops to market. The attraction of farms as land banks for urban development remains high and many farmers were prepared to cash in on this opportunity, especially as they faced retirement and with no family interested to continue making a living from agriculture.

At the same time, health issues had emerged related to these market changes with availability, quality, affordability and access exacerbating lifestyle disease incidence. Health and farming interests now had a reason to join forces in 'reorienting' the food system so that local producers and local consumers could better and more directly support each other.

Tools

Hawkesbury Harvest is run by dedicated volunteers.

Success is founded on the dedication and drive of a few local champions who, after more than a decade, are still active and pursuing the Harvest agenda. A series of well-designed and conceptualised projects enabled Harvest to secure seed funding for each of its initiatives.

This work was done by Harvest's champions who also had deep connections into agriculture, tourism, food, health and education institutions, and who were able to activate these links and networks for the advantage of Harvest. This case itself is an example.

According to founding Chairman David Mason, local media in the Hawkesbury played a significant part in the establishment of Hawkesbury Harvest.

"One journalist wrote a great deal of copy about the organisation's development and what it would mean to the local farmers and associated local community," David said.

"The initial public meetings were well promoted and reported and thus well patronised. As the organisation developed its flagship product, the Farm Gate Trail it attracted the interest of Sydney ABC Radio 702's *Weekends with Simon Marnie* show."

The 'Farm Gate Trail' is a weekly segment of the show every Saturday morning with a listening audience of up to 100,000. Hawkesbury Harvest and its members have featured on nearly if not all lifestyle and food related television programs in NSW.

David said the support of the political and bureaucratic arms of Hawkesbury City Council was instrumental in the organisation getting off the ground financially.



Council provided funding to harness the enthusiasm of those who were initially involved.

“Once people realised they had government support they responded by vigorously affirming their ownership and commitment to taking the project forward,” David says.

“This brought in state and federal regional economic development interests and further funding was acquired to employ a person charged with building on what the members had already achieved.

“Hawkesbury Harvest was and continues to be a process through which individuals, groups, public and private organisations can participate to contribute to and receive the benefits provided by that process.”

Outcomes

The alternative channel initiatives are agri-tourism (Farm Gate Trail), farmers markets, open farm days, food and farming events (Slow Food), and provedoring. These initiatives bring producers and consumers together in a range of contexts outside the mainstream system where trade takes place. Farmers reap the benefits of increased margins (often matching the retail price in the supermarkets), and consumers benefit from quality assurance (accessing the best and freshest) and reconnection with our food supply system (food provenance).

Hawkesbury Harvest and its initiatives are recognised nationally and internationally. They have raised the profile of agriculture and tourism/leisure assets for the region and literally ‘put them on the map’. Harvest itself also performs a policy and advocacy role for the region, agriculture and tourism, demonstrating strong, practical and economically-driven mechanisms that diversify the regional economy and build relationships between two of Australia’s important industries.

The Hawkesbury Harvest model is also having far reaching influence.

David Mason has been working with Regional Development Australia Southern Inland since February 2010 to establish an umbrella organisation called Southern NSW Harvest. This will encompass the LGAs of Gundagai, Tumut, Tumbarumba, Temora, Cootamundra, Junee, Wingecarribee, Upper Lachlan, Goulburn/Mulwarree, Yass Valley, Young, Boorowa and Harden.

There is a negative rate of return for a significant number of small to medium family farms right across Australia (ABARE 2002) and David also travelled to Western Australia recently and addressed nine meetings around Perth and down to Bridgetown in the south on this issue.

“My thrust is the role of multifunctional agriculture as a mechanism of contributing to the economic viability of small to medium family farms and associated rural businesses, on farm and in rural communities using Hawkesbury Harvest as an example,” he said.

Advice to others

David Mason says the first thing that is needed is ‘a can do attitude’ within the context of a process of engagement that fosters the development of ownership and commitment to the collectively determined vision, mission, values, objectives and actions.

“Hawkesbury Harvest’s meeting motto was and continues to be is ‘leave your ego at the door,’” he said.

“Success attracts success and it is surprising where involvement and assistance comes from when it becomes obvious that the organisation is going to succeed no matter what.

“Hawkesbury Harvest is a catalyst organisation run by volunteers – this was/is its charter. And as such maintaining the passion is an issue.

“Being not-for-profit means Harvest itself has struggled to be economically self-sufficient and transition into a ‘business’. While this is what funding agencies require, Harvest’s role as an incubator organisation makes a profit motive difficult to justify when the reason for being is to assist the farming community bootstrap its way to alternative futures.”

Harvest is one of the growing number of community-based organisations focused on industry with a public good charter. It stepped into a void from which government had retreated, and yet there was a demand for the assistance that Harvest has provided within the agriculture industry.

Government has supported Harvest financially, but now that the agenda it addressed is receiving mainstream attention, a better funding system for such initiatives is required that does not demand constant sapping of human and other resources through the competitive grants and funding model.

Footnote: This case is co-authored by Ian Knowd, whose Doctoral thesis examines the Hawkesbury Harvest phenomenon.

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PARKES ELVIS FESTIVAL

Introduction

Elvis may never have entered a building in the Central NSW town of Parkes, but his spirit is larger than life as 15,000 fans make the pilgrimage every January for the past 20 years to celebrate The King's birthday.

Effectively this crowd more than doubles the population of Parkes, which sits at around 10,000.

The five-day Parkes Elvis Festival program is extending every year, with more than 150 individual events. Features are an Elvis Gospel Church Service, the famous Street Parade, free Elvis in the Park entertainment and various other novelty events such as the 'Back to the Altar with Elvis – Renewal of Wedding Vows', and the Miss Priscilla Dinner along with other events including the Cars of the Elvis Era Show and Elvis Poet's Breakfast.

Impetus

The burning question is what does Elvis have to do with a small town in Central NSW where cattle, cropping and mining reign supreme for the rest of the year?

Local Residents Bob and Anne Steel purchased a local convention centre in the 1980s. Being big fans of Elvis they named this 'Gracelands'. After a dinner party at Gracelands over a glass of wine the idea of the Parkes Elvis Festival was conceived. January was identified as a great time of year for the festival as this period traditionally experienced a tourism lull. A small group of enthusiastic community members embraced the idea and the festival grew.

Parkes is home of some very enthusiastic Elvis fans. One Parkes man has even changed his name to Elvis. Although

not all residents embraced the association with Elvis initially, with the success of the festival and the positive outcomes generated within the community, this has altered the perception and the community at large now embrace the event. The profile generated from the festival has attracted a museum collection of Elvis memorabilia giving Parkes a year-round Elvis attraction. Parkes is a town once best known for 'the dish' (telescope) is increasingly generating a reputation as "The Elvis Capital of Australia".

Tools

A can-do attitude, a mandate to generate positive outcomes across the Parkes community, community participation and engagement, the support of Council and Parkes Shire Tourism Unit have all been significant factors towards the success of the festival.

Parkes innovatively encouraged local business and community groups to develop their own events and services to benefit from the increased visitation. This had a positive effect of keeping money in the local economy as well as extending the festival program.

Outcomes

With a population influx of 15,000 the economic benefits of tourism to the town are obvious. It is estimated that the festival generates more than \$7 million into the regional economy. The flow on effect is felt widely with nearby towns and villages reaching accommodation capacity and bus services operating within a 100km radius to bring visitors into town.

Every sector of the community can benefit in some way if they choose.



"Elvises" with the town's namesake, Sir Henry Parkes.

Local business and community groups are encouraged to get into the spirit of things by developing specialised services and events and benefiting directly. Parkes residents can also directly benefit economically through monies generated via the home hosting program, where visitors stay with locals. Organisers seek to engage local businesses where possible in delivering the festival.

The CountryLink Parkes Elvis Festival generates international, national and local media interest increasing the profile of Parkes exponentially. Parkes is increasingly becoming known as the “Elvis Capital of Australia” which is a unique selling point for visitors and encourages interest in the shire.

Advice to others

The first major challenge of the festival was how to take the success and interest that was being generated to take the event to the ‘next level’. The support of Parkes Shire Council and the involvement of Parkes Shire Tourism at that stage was critical in helping the community group attract funding, sponsorship and strategic assistance.

Other challenges have included developing community support for the event which involved generating opportunities for the community to engage and benefit from the festival.

Infrastructure requirements have also been challenging with the sheer number of visitors to a town of Parkes’ size but innovations such as Tent City, the successful home hosting program and increased motor home and camping opportunities continue to address these.

The ability of the community to rally together to solve problems as they arise and a “can-do” country attitude has been the key to successfully overcoming challenges.

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BACKTRACK

Introduction

BackTrack's goal is to take the most marginalised and disengaged youth demographic and empower them to make positive life choices and foster successful long term integration into industry and the community, thereby not only improving their quality of life, but also strengthening the wellbeing of the entire community.

The program was established in 2006 in Armidale NSW by youth worker Bernie Shakeshaft, in response to a need he saw for intervention in the lives of youth (13 to 17 years old) who are at imminent risk of dropping out of school due to lack of attendance and expulsions; substance abuse; incarceration; delinquency; homelessness and for whom existing agencies have provided little or ineffective support or cannot retain within their systems.

To date, the BackTrack program has successfully improved life outcomes for more than 100 of Armidale's disadvantaged youth.

BackTrack operates three integrated programs for young men and one for young women. Paws Up began as an engagement tool where participants train dogs and now jump them in competitions, performing at Agricultural Shows and invitational events. Iron Man Welders is a fully functioning welding shed offering training in trade engineering skills, while AgLads provides training and progression to paid work crews in agriculture. For young women the program 'Imagine this' is focussed on education and personal growth pathways.

Impetus

The Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that the home of BackTrack, Armidale, has the highest percentage of population of youth 10 -19 years old in NSW. It also has three percent higher unemployment than the state average and has an indigenous youth population four percent higher than NSW average.

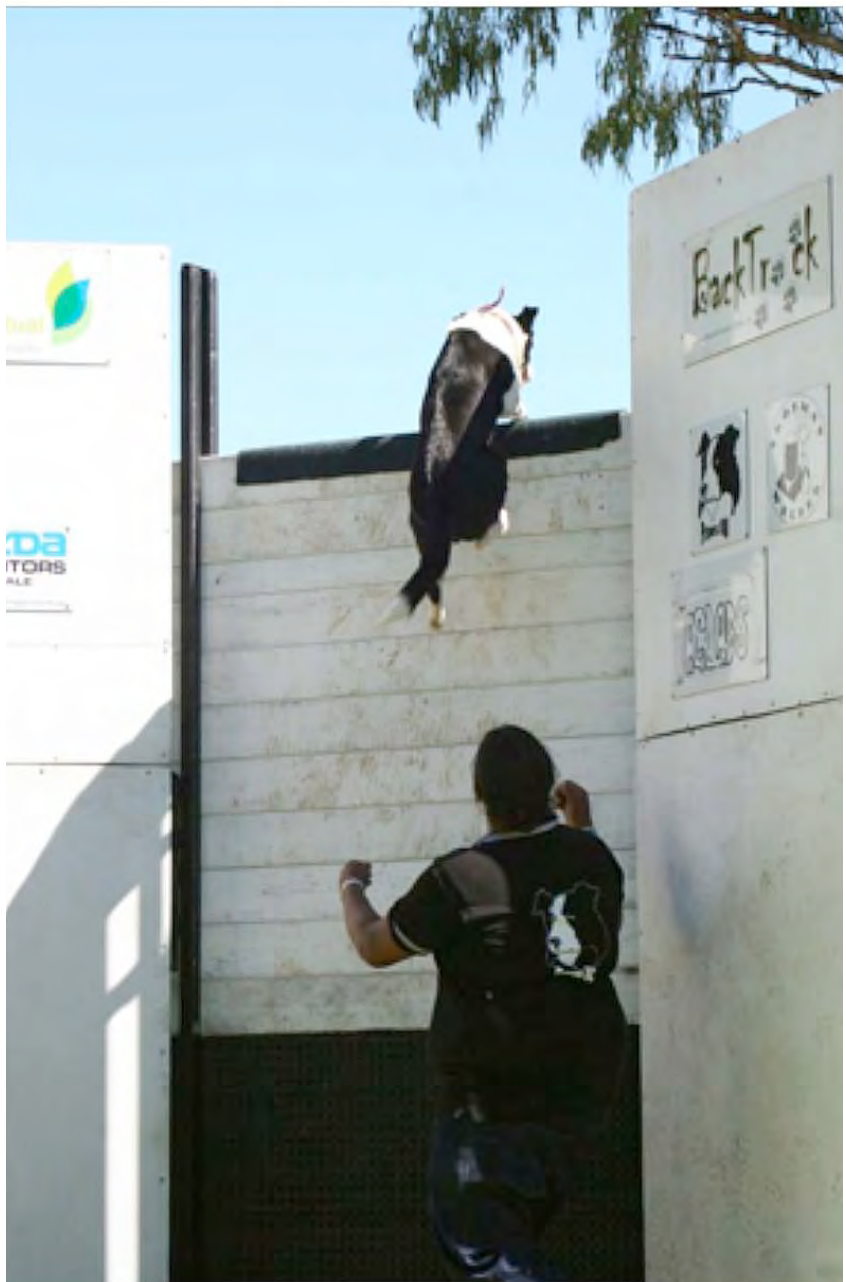
According to records of police in Armidale LGA in 2010, this demographic was responsible for:

- 50 percent of robberies;
- 96 percent of break and enters (residential and commercial);
- 91 percent of motor vehicle theft; and
- 53 percent of malicious damage.

"In my 25 years of youth work, my unrelenting desire has been to educate the community that these young people they consider to be most marginalised or difficult have skills or aspirations and want a sense of belonging and connectedness just like us all," Bernie says.

"BackTrack pushes the boundaries of how to work alongside young people in this generation and re-defines what is possible for them to achieve using a unique approach of engagement and connection.

"When you change the life outcomes for youth you improve the overall quality of community life."



Paws Up is a program of BackTrack that involves youth training working dogs for high jumping events, and works by the analogy of "have a go – there will be someone there to catch you if you fall".

BackTrack uses an innovative and holistic approach to facilitate the emergence of respectful, hard working and responsible members of society by:

- supporting personal development – peer mentoring and group exchanges to build self-awareness and self-esteem;
- facilitating community engagement and social awareness – involvement in community projects, for example volunteering during recent flood relief efforts;
- providing a successful alternative to mainstream education and training pathways for this demographic – hands on learning environment;
- developing partnerships with local high schools to effectively support attendance and completion of HSC;
- opening training pathways– enrolment of participants in Cert 2 and 3 Vocational Education qualifications at TAFE and Tocal Agricultural College; and
- opening career pathways – mentoring and work experience opportunities with local industry, traineeships and apprenticeships.

Tools

The principal tools underpinning BackTrack are a physical space, youth worker, community partnerships, education partnerships and programs. Over time the staffing and program options have expanded, however the principal tools remain the same.

Physical Space

BackTrack operates out of the old Armidale Council works depot. This facility provides for administration, youth work, mentoring and the Iron Man Welders Shed, which is a fully operational welding shed at training standard. While much of the BackTrack training, community projects and work experiences occur off-site, the shed provides a central hub and ‘home’ for the program.

Staff

Founder and primary youth worker Bernie Shakeshaft provides the direction and skills to shape the programs and a significant amount of supervision for participants.

“Four youth worker trainees who began as participants and have undertaken training now lead the younger participants,” he said.

“Mentors provide supervision, guidance and organisation to the full range of programs on a part time basis and a program co-ordinator who assists in administration, funding, training and program development.”

Community Partnerships

A range of community partnerships exist that support the operation of BackTrack. Businesses provide donations of materials and services and opportunities for sub-contracting and work experience; council provides the shed site at a nominal fee; community groups and individuals support the programs and individual participants through time, funds and volunteering.



The Backtrack lads and Bernie Shakeshaft (centre, front) showed off their dog-handling skills at the Second Sustaining Rural Communities Conference.

Educational Partnerships

Alternative educational pathways are essential to providing outcomes for BackTrack participants. Duval High School and Armidale High School work closely with BackTrack to ensure that students are achieving necessary outcomes and being recognised for their progress. Armidale TAFE and Tocal College at Patterson provide flexible training delivery options for VET qualifications.

Programs

Each of the programs is designed to engage and build self-esteem while delivering educational and training outcomes. The programs have developed as need arises and followed the direction of participant needs and community and industry support.

Outcome

Just over 100 youth from Armidale have benefited from this program and has significantly changed their lives.

Bernie says he has found BackTrack's methodology significantly reduces disengagement from education, unemployment and associated welfare dependence, the high rates of recidivism experienced by this demographic, the economic costs associated with delinquency and incarceration and the prevalence of anti-social behaviour in the community.

To date the program has facilitated many positive outcomes including:

- school attendance rates with a target of 85 percent;
- enrolment and completion in Vocational Education Training with a target 80 percent completion rate;
- pre-employment and work readiness training with a target of 100 percent completion;
- employment outcomes;
- positive engagement in community for this demographic; and
- personal well-being of participants.

Crime Statistics in the Armidale LGA also show that break and enter incidents dropped from 204 in 2007 to 70 in 2010 and incidence of robberies has been reduced by 50 percent over that period. Motor vehicle theft was reduced by around 45 percent between 2008 and 2010.

Advice to others

Bernie says six years of a trial and error approach to developing BackTrack has highlighted some keys to success.

"Community support is essential for sustainability, integration, relationships and mutual commitment to success," Bernie says.

"Programs succeed when they engage and foster connectedness and when they deliver real outcomes that enable individuals to change their circumstances.

"I have found programs work when there are no constraints on completion times and participants thrive when they have input to program development and choices.

"Funding can be a hurdle and burden but will follow outcomes."

THEODORE BETTER BUSINESS, BETTER COMMUNITY CAMPAIGN



Pretty as a picture: the rejuvenated main street of Theodore, thanks to a far-thinking group.

Introduction

Theodore is a small town in central QLD of around 1000 residents, servicing surrounding cotton, grain and beef producers along with some mining. The Theodore Chamber of Commerce is a forward looking and proactive group who joined to build a future vision to sustain and revitalise the township and its people. That vision resulted in the town starting a business mentoring scheme for local entrepreneurs and going on to win a national “Revive and Thrive Challenge” based on their submission of the “Better Business, Better Community” campaign. The town was awarded \$50,000 to help them achieve their vision to revitalise their main street and encourage businesses and people back to town.

Impetus

In a sad yet similar story to many rural towns, over the past decade Theodore experienced a steady decline in retail outlets and problems attracting tradespeople and other staff to the town.

Lacking a butcher, baker and with an ageing workforce of professionals and tradespeople, the COC decided it was time to act. It was thought that by strengthening and supporting business people, prosperity and longevity for the town would follow.

“The Chamber wanted to give support and encouragement to current and potential business people, to take the fear

away from taking the leap into becoming an entrepreneur or moving to our town,” says Fleur Anderson, a local farmer and key driver of the Better Business, Better Community (BBBC) campaign.

“Even though some of the skills were in the town, people often feel the risks are too high to give up current employment to become self-employed. Support networks help people to take the leap.”

Prior to winning the Revive and Thrive competition which ultimately gave the Chamber the funds to enact their program, a business coach had been employed to help existing businesses run more efficiently and sustainably.

“The idea of giving more support grew from that, this was stage one and BBBCF was the next step in providing support and encouragement,” Fleur said.

“It has given people a bit of encouragement and the support, particularly when people are a bit anxious about getting into new businesses or changing their location, it can take a bit of pressure off in the first 12 months.”

Tools

Resources and commitment from people is needed to administer such a program. It’s all about people.

“People have to believe in the idea and what it will do for the town,” Fleur says.

“There can be detractors, but if you are clear about your vision and have purpose and support it is hard not to succeed.

“There is always needed a core group of individuals willing to give their time for the betterment of the broader community. In this case it was the Chamber of Commerce, but outside of that you still need people who believe in the positive outcomes of a project.”

Fleur said in due to the nature of this project, they had to put checks and balances in place to ensure that there was security of the funding – that is if the business failed in the first 12 months the fund was reimbursed or if the applicant fell behind in their rent or wasn’t using the funds for the desired purpose funding would cease.

Businesses had to be accountable as well and report in each quarter.

Outcome

By creating incentives for shops to reopen and to attract skilled workers, the town had clear, targeted and measurable strategies for their small rural community. For their innovative idea and clear vision, the Theodore COC received \$40,000 from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal to go towards a town revitalisation program. A further \$10,000 was awarded as a state prize.

There are three aspects to the program which was designed to strengthen community morale and drive economic development.

The Landlord’s Fund

This fund financially helped landlords of local commercial properties paint their shopfronts to improve the overall look of the main street. Every shop front in the main street was revitalised under this part of the initiative.

“It really helps the psyche and gave a better feel and vibe to the town,” Fleur says.

“It did work and created positive conversations and vibe in the town – giving business owners more pride and optimism. Visitors too are more attracted to a town that looks prosperous and vibrant.”

The Skilled Workers Fund

This fund is aimed at attracting skilled professionals and tradespeople to the town through a subsidised rent scheme.

“No young ones were looking to stay in Theodore to complete trade qualifications and attracting tradespeople to move to our town with competition from mines either side of the town was difficult,” Fleur said.

“Some businesses needed staff but found they couldn’t compete with what larger metropolitan areas have to offer or the lure of mining.

“This initiative also forms succession planning for local business, as many of the town’s tradespeople were elderly and approaching retirement.

“Even though the rental subsidy was for 12 months, the hurdle is attracting people here in the first place, so once we got them here we hoped they would want to stay.”

Three businesses at risk of closing are still operating in town and a side effect has been that people coming to work for others have now started their own business.

The New Business Fund

Increasing the mix of businesses in town by offering one year’s free shop rental to any new business was the third incentive. By subsidising leases for new businesses, Theodore has attracted four new businesses and three professionals. The next phase of the program is to support these people and increase sustainability. This will include a 12-month review with the business coach to identify what (if anything) individual proprietors/professionals needs to do to improve longevity and sustainability.

Advice to others

A major learning is to provide ongoing support and the resources needed to implement such a program.

“We are struggling to find ways to continue our support and development of small business in a really meaningful and significant way without funding,” Fleur said.

“And as with any new initiative there is a noisy minority who believe it was a waste of time and not going to provide outcomes but we had to bite our tongues and prove them wrong!

“We had to put checks and balances in place to ensure that there was security for the funding and it wasn’t misused. We had to be accountable.”

Footnote: The Revive and Thrive Challenge was a partnership between ABC Rural, ABC Sport and the Foundation for Regional and Rural Renewal

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THE GLOUCESTER PROJECT

Introduction

The Gloucester Project has been encouraging and promoting horticulture as a viable and sustainable industry for the Stroud-Gloucester Valley in NSW for more than three years with much success.

The Gloucester Project (TGP) is a community-based organisation which has developed an innovative regional economic development program which promises to increase the economic and employment potential of a region. The local movement acquired a formal structure in June 2008 with the incorporation of The Gloucester Project Incorporated as a non-profit community association, and TGP moved immediately to publicise its philosophy and objectives. Membership grew rapidly, and the group attracted a number of grants.

On the basis of its research, TGP is promoting food production as the major economic activity for the area and as such have developed The Tucker Garden Patch as a demonstration site for TGP which demonstrates growing methods, crop selection and creates marketing opportunities.

TGP has established a range of consumer-direct market channels that allow small-holding farmers the opportunity to diversify their business model and develop alternative survival strategies. These initiatives shorten the value chain, re-build relationships between growers and consumers, and reinforce the importance and identity of regional agriculture to community.

Impetus

The Stroud-Gloucester Valley of NSW and surrounding areas has historically been a significant food bowl with dairy and beef its major products. There was also a once active citrus industry however, changing populations and growing areas saw most growing move to irrigation areas. Gloucester also has a number of small boutique industries such as viticulture, herbs, apiaries and organic products. The region is climate

advantaged, close to major population centres, has a stable population base and increasing numbers of small acre farmers interested in finding suitable development for their land.

The Tucker Garden Patch was to be an education facility to provide a showcase for locals and visitors to gain their attention and then increase their interest to grow. It was clear from TGP's surveys and discussion with various community groups and individuals that it had a generation or two who had lost the skills and confidence in growing vegetables and fruit. The Patch has been an outstanding success in garnering interest at all levels of the community and very much from small property owners.

Outcomes

The Gloucester Project has now developed a regional development model to use as a platform for the expanding food production and distribution industry. This regional development model borrows from the "Localisation" economic movement and is based on relocating in the region the enterprises which manage and control all aspects of the growing and distribution system. TGP acts as co-ordinator of the system, thereby linking producers and consumers as an aid to risk reduction and sustainable practices. It is a system designed to encourage the reinvestment of generated wealth back into the region.

The NSW Government has now granted \$300,000 to TGP to develop its new Tucker Patch as a demonstration horticultural farm and a centre for training and employment of a skilled workforce. TGP's model is getting increasing attention from Regional Development agencies, and its development over the next few years may provide valuable lessons.

A number of highly motivated and dedicated individuals have been producing and developing organic and commercial market garden properties and have joined TGP to help promote this new industry for Gloucester.



The Gloucester Project's community market stall.

The Tucker Garden Patch demonstration site is an integral part of TGP and research has been completed there in relation to organic and sustainable methods of soil creation, improvement and management. A wide variety of citrus, stone fruit and berries have also been trialled to assess their suitability to the region. Data has been collected regarding suitable vegetable crops for personal and commercial growing in the Gloucester region. Soil pH and biota, pest management, biodiversity, dam water health, organic growing methods and marketing of produce have all been studied. Information from these studies has been, and is continuing to be made available through TGP's two websites, reports, workshops, demonstration and field days.

The Patch had a number of goals which have been achieved.

"We now have over 50 properties trialling vegetable growing for personal and/or commercial growing," said President Ken Johnson.

"To date TGP has held over 20 workshops including how to grow berries, garlic and vegetables, propagation, seed saving, water health, soil improvement and creation, organic farming and growing vegetables organised specially for Gloucester Primary school children.

"The workshops have been a great success, attracting more than 150 people with much positive feedback and requests for further sessions.

"Many participants are now growing vegetables and implementing skills learned at the workshops. The attendance at TGP workshops, information days and working bees demonstrates continually growing interest."

The workshops also led to the establishment of a garlic cluster with around 15 properties trialling growing many varieties of garlic. It is anticipated that this will become one of a number of viable commercial crops for the region.

The school workshops have led to the establishment of a small vegetable garden run by school staff and students with

help from interested parents. TGP has also been able to establish an official Seed Saving Group registered with the International seed saving network.

"The community is becoming increasingly involved, with shop owners providing their excess paper and cardboard for recycling, people are providing seed and seedlings for growing and constant requests are being received for the running of more workshops related to growing," Ken said.

"The Tucker Garden Patch has led to the establishment of a growers' network in Gloucester and surrounds. This has been achieved with new growers coming on board all the time. We are aiming to have at least 10 properties involved in a horticulture/market garden network."

The community stall at the Farmer's Market has a regular number of growers providing produce with new growers showing up each market.

"We have also been able to provide a number of market outlets for growers, with links direct to buyers who will take as much produce as we can offer. There is also a Gloucester box distribution system currently being trialled and we have been approached to provide produce for a distribution system in Sydney.

"Now that we have raised awareness of horticulture as a viable industry, have property owners growing more, attracted interest from government agencies, provided initial market outlets etc, it is time to move into the next stage of the 'food bowl' project."

TGP has a number of possible ways to move the project forward and closer to the overall goal to develop a commercial market garden industry in the region and promote the concept of preserving the region and its land and water for future sustainable food production and expansion.

These initiatives include a community demonstration market garden – not reliant on volunteers, a study involving at



The Tucker Garden Patch

least five farms with different microclimates and types of land to demonstrate specific sustainable growing methods. TGP is also aiming to establish a network of properties who are interested in commercial market gardening. This will involve the co-operation of the property owners in trialling different methods that suit their farms and providing opportunities for interested persons to visit the operations. Marketing strategies for selling produce will be discussed and developed.

Tools

TGP has only been possible due to the outstanding efforts of all its volunteers and supporters and a substantial grant was also major contribution. The media has also been a useful tool as features in printed and other media have attracted much interest from other communities and interested individuals about our growing methods and goals, even as far away as Iraq.

The Tucker Garden Patch website has played an integral role in its success.

“Our voluntary website managers have kept the site up to date with user friendly information, notices and articles of importance for media and interested people,” Ken said.

“All workshop information and literature was published for public access and photos regularly posted to show how The Patch has progressed.

“It is important to note that many media representatives visited the website prior to contacting us for interviews and articles.

“It also became clear very early in the formation of The Patch that a social aspect of it was critical to the development and sustainability of volunteers to maintain what we were trying to achieve. As a result Friends of the Tucker Patch was formed.”

A number of critical factors have been achieved through this group’s activities. It has fostered a feeling of ownership and camaraderie between volunteers and supporters. It managed, planned and run all workshops. It invited and introduced new people to TGP and its goals. It promoted The Patch and TGP’s overall goals through media, local groups and internet.

The open air ‘gallery’ aspect of The Patch has also been a success and contributed to spreading the word about sustainable growing. The art workshops attracted people who otherwise may not show an interest in vegetable growing.

TGP’s entry in Waste 2 Art (which TGP’s entry won locally and runner-up regionally) created contact with Forster and Taree who are promoting sustainable living and recycling. They have since referred a number of growers from their area who have visited the Patch and a number of TGP’s growers’ properties. TGP keeps contact with these people via email and newsletters.

Advice to others

The current system for food production and distribution has been built to meet the needs of large capital enterprises. This has in turn led to the encouragement of larger production units and the elimination of small producers from market access.

Therefore, says Ken Johnson, any community thinking of creating a similar project, it is necessary to create an alternative processing and distribution system if you are to bring more producers into the industry.

“To encourage more producers to produce, when they cannot access more than a limited local market doesn’t work,” Ken said.

“The alternative system must be created to give producers, even of limited quantities, a cash return for their efforts. The market system must be expanded as the production increases, so a co-ordinating agency is needed to support this systematic development.”

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MAKE IT WORK – NORTH WEST ADVISORY GROUP

Introduction

The North West Advisory Group (NWAG) takes the approach that each business, regardless of industry sector, should work together as a multi-national corporation, contributing to the region's prosperity. This bold approach is reflected in its increasingly successful brand Make It Work, through which the group's initiatives are promoted.

The group is made up of representatives from local town-based businesses servicing the area, council, mining, agriculture and education.

Impetus

Various industries in the North West of NSW have long been trying to overcome the challenges of ensuring long-term sustainability and economic prosperity in a region with an increasingly competitive job market. This region is in the heart of prime agricultural land, with irrigation and dryland farming, grazing and now mining being the major industries.

Keeping and attracting 'good' staff were serious issues for most businesses.

"Fixing the regions from the regions" is the mantra of the NWAG.

"We needed individual tools for businesses and employees, free of charge, to retain good people in the bush," says development manager Russell Stewart.

"So this group thought, 'Collectively let's come up with a way to fix it'."

NWAG was formed as a result of the North West Regional Jobs Summit in July 2009, jointly hosted by AgriFood Skills Australia (now auspicing NWAG).

"The consensus was that the North West region was well placed to develop its own solutions through a cross-industry, whole of community partnership approach," Russell said.

"The group acknowledged that only through collaboration and sharing of risk would the region be able to grow and retain a pool of skilled workers. It was agreed that a strong industry-led steering group was paramount – The North West Advisory Group.

Russell says the summit clearly showed that the issues of skills and labour are inextricably linked, as are the answers.

NWAG identified four priorities from the summit and began to develop and implement strategies across the following key focus areas:

- Professional development for business owners and managers especially in the areas of contemporary HR practice, skills utilisation, job design, recruitment strategies for permanent and seasonal workers.
- Retention of the existing workforce through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), up-skilling and developing cross-industry skill sets which address labour needs in the region.



Make It Work Chairman Greg Morris is a Narrabri businessman who has implemented the philosophies of the program, pictured with workshop manager Daniel Hobden.

- Career opportunities for young people e.g. giving students an appreciation of jobs that are available in the region through greater promotion to career advisers and at local career expos, expand work experience places and a program focusing on young people in their gap year.
- Assess regional skills demand i.e. develop a skills demand calendar across five industry sectors that will allow peak labour demands to be tracked and adapted for skills utilisation purposes.

Outcomes

In many ways NWAG strategies are at the cutting edge of modern approaches to regional development. Regional development theorists and practitioners are moving from industry attraction strategies toward 'economic gardening', growing local entrepreneurial skills.

According to Russell Stewart, the economic gardening approach was the intuitive *modus operandi* of from the first group's first meeting and its subsequent achievements are examples of best-practice in 'economic gardening'.

The major outcome of the NWAG group has been the success of the Make It Work brand and the programs contained in it in sourcing and retaining skilled labour in the regions in which it is operating.

Programs under the Make It Work banner are the Employer of Choice Survey, Sharing Workers Locally, Jobs Summit, Skills Demand Calendar, Cross Industry Skilling and Jobs Marketplace, which have all shown success. The blueprints for these innovations are now being used across Australia by communities, councils and other industry, government and training institutions. More groups continue to seek to be a part of the NWAG and Make It Work initiative.

Make It Work has already won two regional development awards for innovation, for the Employer of Choice (EOC) survey system and Sharing Workers Locally initiative.

In late 2010 an independent economic impact analysis of the initiative *Developing the Narrabri workforce- An assessment of the potential impact of the Workforce Development Strategy in Narrabri*, identified benefits well beyond expectations conceived at the conclusion of the Jobs Summit.

The researchers identified two potential quantifiable impacts of the initiative:

- An improvement in the productivity of the Narrabri labour force of potentially as much as 3.2 percent per year (labour productivity only)
- A 33 percent reduction in net migration of workers in the target labour market (labour productivity plus reduced outward migration)

The results translate to a cumulative total of \$29 million relative to the reference case, an estimated \$60 million Under the Labour productivity plus Reduced Migration Scenario a cumulative total of relative to the reference case with a net present value of \$46 million, using a four per cent real discount rate.

Russell says the major objectives of the scheme are being met.

In Narrabri in particular there has there been an improvement in staff retention in participating businesses. Better workplaces are being created through the employee survey as complacency levels of employers are reduced in relation to the satisfaction, attitudes, feelings and needs of their employees.

The job sharing agreement has also been successful and now need more workers to fill the pool, as many have now gone onto full time employment in the region, which was another overarching aim.

"We now have quite a few businesses asking for workers to be added to the pool as they don't have work for them all year around. Workers like it too, as the scheme offers variability, security and multi-skilling opportunity," Russell said.

Other outcomes include:

Retention of the existing workforce

Earlier experience had shown that workers were more likely to stay in the industry if they had their skills formally credentialed against industry-specific qualifications. In order to mitigate the outflow of workers from the agrifood industry in particular recognising the skills of existing workers and providing opportunities for up-skilling proved to be successful strategies in broadening the region's skill base.

Stemming the outward migration of young people

Local businesses lamented the loss of its best and brightest young people from the region. The reasons most often cited were the absence of local career pathways and lack of understanding of the potential for local jobs. Initiatives included professional development for local careers advisers and structured work experience programs developed in consultation with the local chamber of commerce.

Attracting new workers

The advent of new and expanding industries presented an opportunity to attract, train and retain workers in the region, and to improve the mobility of workers across enterprises. This led to the introduction of a cross-industry skills development model that was supported by local employers and community leaders. The ACIL Tasman report estimated that under their Labour productivity plus Reduced Migration Scenario a cumulative total of \$60 million relative to the reference case (with a net present value of \$46 million, using a four per cent real discount rate) was achieved. Locally-available skills development

Many local businesses had complained of the necessity to send workers away for training and courses. Training organisations from outside the region (Tocal College and Sydney University) were encouraged to deliver programs locally. The net result being that the local industry came to see that its power as a customer of the system with TAFE offering an expanded range of training at the local campus.

Understanding the region's skills demand

With a growing range of industries and the seasonality of work in the agrifood industry, it was important to understand the nature of jobs and the skills required. The Skills Demand Timeline, a concept first conceived during the Machinery Partnerships Project was implemented with great success meeting the need as both a predictive model for workforce planning and training schedule.

Decent jobs

There was acknowledgement that industry, individual enterprises and peak bodies needed to focus at the workplace level and re-examine some of the most entrenched cultures and management practices that affect each worker every day. The notion of 'employer of choice' found resonance in the region, typically focussing on lifting employers' capabilities around attraction, retention and the development of human capital.

Tools

As with many of the initiatives outlined in the case studies, a committed group of people with a common purpose who are willing to consider new ideas is the mainstay of success.

"People with passion for what they are doing are needed," says Russell.

"In our case government support (through Agrifood Skills) was integral in the formation of Make It Work, as well as the support of local businesses.

"Support from local council has been a big factor, as ultimately councils are the hub of a town. Otherwise it can be very hard to grow anything."

Establishing a brand – in this case – the Make It Work brand – has been crucial, as it encompasses the ideologies of the initiative and makes it instantly recognisable to those in the community.

"Thinking regionally and acting locally has also been a major factor in our success," Russell says.

By garnering support from adjoining councils, employers, NGOs and government organisations, strength of the initiative is heightened.

Advice to others

The 2010 independent report identified key elements that contributed to Make It Work's success:

- A cross-industry regional skills development model driven by a local employer and community leaders' group to attract, train and retain workers in the region and to improve the mobility of workers across enterprises.
- Improving the broader skills of the region including transport, services and local government workforces that support key agrifood and resources sectors.
- Employers collectively working to enhance innovation and productivity through a range of initiatives, including through new career pathways, and developing skilled labour pools and demand schedules within the region, to manage seasonal and other employment needs.

- The Employer of Choice program aimed at improving employers workforce management capabilities.

Further to this, Russell Stewart says is the attitude of the group toward cohesiveness.

"At our meetings we believe in leaving any crap at the door and let's do it for the region," Russell says. "We don't wear any hats in our meetings.

"You don't see many groups of this type with all the different industry sectors involved."

The North West Advisory Group was established as a reference group under the auspice of AgriFood Skills Australia in order to avoid the administrative burden and costs associated with establishing an incorporated body.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Programs under the Make it Work Banner

Employer of Choice survey and workshop

The Employer of Choice (EOC) survey system for staff and businesses won the Education and Research category at the Northern Inland Innovation Awards in 2010. The program is undergoing final refinements with Sydney University before being made available to businesses everywhere.

"The aggregated responses provide a clear picture of how the business is tracking. This helps identify areas for improvement and allows goals to be set that are realistic and measurable," says Russell Stewart.

The Employer of Choice notion was originally identified by the NWAG in recognition that businesses needed to improve employment practice if they were to prosper in an increasingly competitive job market.

A series of EOC workshops across the region starting in Narrabri in December 2009 were held with chambers of commerce, Regional Development Australia groups, skills development groups, RTOs and local councils. Interest also came from RDA Far West NSW, the Queensland Beef Industry Network and Dairy Australia in Victoria.

Tracking seasonal labour demand

Mobility of labour within the region is an important part of the labour market for many businesses in and around the North West. Seasonality is an inherent part of many agricultural enterprises.

The Skills Demand Calendar provides a useful tool for regional businesses to identify and plan around periods of peak demand. It is also used as a skills development planning resource whereby workers can be trained in readiness for seasonal jobs such as cotton ginning and the grain harvest, for which there were over 600 casual jobs advertised in the 2009 wheat season.

Consolidation

A proposal was developed collaboratively by AgriFood Skills Australia on behalf of the Make it Work, BackTrack and the Gwydir Learning Region. Each of these successful groups identified the benefit of combining their efforts in developing a holistic skills and workforce development strategy across the whole New England, North West region. The proposal is currently before the NSW Department of Premier's and Cabinet office in Armidale. The NSW Department of Education and Communities is showing a strong interest in the proposal.

Regional Skills Utilisation Strategy

The challenges of ensuring long-term capability, sustainability and profitability are magnified in regional areas where there is a competitive job market. This strategy is one of facilitation, collaboration and capacity building as a means of developing the region's human capital.

Training in isolation, even at its most effective, will continue to be an insufficient response. The group concluded that enterprises and individuals only reap the full benefits of skills investment when workplace environments enable staff to not just use their skills, but to use them well.

Fostering improvements that lift self-worth and esteem underpins the worker's commitment to the job, builds motivation and promotes a willingness to innovate. While the theory of skills utilisation is relatively logical, converting this into practice has proved a challenge.

Skills recognition – a valuable retention strategy

Many people are unaware of the opportunity to have their skills formally recognised as an alternative to enrolling in a course of study. Many regional workforces are highly skilled in real terms however many of these workers do not possess formal qualifications. The skills recognition initiative was developed with a specific focus on those workers without a relevant post school qualification.

The Skills Recognition program instituted in the North West differed markedly to the typical approach. The program was fully supported and assessors worked with the candidate on-site to help collect the required evidence.

Apart from providing nationally recognised qualifications, most importantly, skills recognition has proven to be a valuable strategy in retaining the existing workforce.

OUTBACK BEDS INCORPORATED



Guests have a real taste of The Outback at Kilcowera Station near Thargomindah

Introduction

Outback Beds is a network of people offering farm stays and accommodation throughout Outback NSW and just across the Queensland border, who have come together to present local and overseas travellers with outback hospitality and accommodation they can trust and enjoy.

This is allowing travellers to stay in unique and quality-assured accommodation across a diverse range of iconic destinations, from working sheep and cattle stations, opal mining towns, bed and breakfasts in remote areas, tranquil river campsites, self-contained cottages, original eco-architecture, shearers' quarters and camel campouts. "It's a 'true-blue' outback adventure" with the benefit of an accommodation network offering security and reliability for travellers in an often harsh environment.

Impetus

The idea of a network for agri-tourism operators in Outback NSW was first canvassed at a workshop supported by the then Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) with involvement from the Bourke Rural Counselling Service in December 2001. The network was initially assisted through the DSRD's Towns and Villages Futures Program. As a result, Outback Beds was established in 2002 by a group of people who had a vision for diversifying the use of their land beyond that of regular agriculture.

For most participants it was seen as a secondary source of income. At the time, rural operators were dealing with a decline in returns from their primary industry owing to a downturn in commodity prices and one of the worst droughts in living memory. There was a real need to

diversify to find another source of income to see these people through otherwise hard times.

Visiting The Outback is a quintessentially Australian experience as this part of the country and its culture is quite different from what travellers experience in the rest of Australia and even around the world.

The aim of Outback Beds continues to be to increase tourism to Outback NSW and the prosperity of the people who live there, by tapping into the 4WD camping market, grey nomads, event-related travel (for example race meetings and rodeos) and specialty markets such as fishing and bird watching. It is a wonderful opportunity for people visiting from metropolitan areas to see what really happens in country NSW and south west Queensland.

Tools

To establish a cooperative group like Outback Beds, inspiration and people with a passion are needed. One of the initial aims was to define a motto to encapsulate the essence of what the group does. The Outback Beds' motto is "Stay in The Outback with friends".

"You definitely need more than one integral person because it is very difficult for one person alone, but once there are a few supporters more generally come," Outback Beds' secretary Beverley Meyer said.

Government departments are integral. Outback Beds has received a lot of support along the way, which has included not only funding but good advice on setting up and managing this initiative.

As accommodation is generally in disused on-farm buildings, there were start-up costs associated with bringing facilities

up to standard, whether it was shearers' huts, cottages or camping grounds and amenities. Funding came from the operators, and at times, with some help from government funding.

Other costs are associated with council approvals, insurance and maintenance.

As most members of the Outback Beds group are farmers or graziers first and foremost, knowledge of marketing, tourism and the accommodation industry was relatively unknown to most. However Beverley says "there is plenty of opportunity to learn new skills".

A project coordinator was enlisted to devise a business and marketing plan with funding from the DSRD's Towns and Villages Futures Program. Members allocate marketing funds as part of the budget each year so that group marketing can be undertaken.

Outcomes

Celebrating 10 years in operation this year, Outback Beds is a working example of the power of networks, community spirit and determination. Starting with just 12 members in 2002, this has increased to 22 and requests continually come from others wishing to join the network.

The scheme now covers an area larger than most European countries, from the Murray River in the south, to the NSW-SA border in the west, just beyond the Queensland border in the north and as far east as Coonabarabran. The network offers a range of accommodation from historic hotels and bush pubs to farm stays on working stations.

In 2005 Outback Beds won the Business Enterprise Award at the NSW Regional Achievement and Community Awards. In 2006 they won the Destination and Product Marketing Category of the Inland NSW Tourism Awards.

The network's encouragement of visitors to the more remote regions has a positive economic flow on for others businesses in small towns and surrounding areas and provides a linked route through remote territory.

The tyranny of distance would have made a concept such as Outback Beds impossible in the past – but the internet in particular has overcome much of the difficulty and is used to the group's advantage. It allows frequent communication between these 'safe havens' for travellers.

Outback Beds has dispelled the myths about travelling in remote areas and removes the 'fear factor' some people have about travelling in The Outback. Travellers are reassured about the availability of supplies like water and fuel and information and weather and road conditions.

When people ring the 1800 number or an individual operator, travel guidance is available through advising people what the roads are like, and places to stop and rest along the way.

Members of the network have also been able to act as 'ambassadors' for country people, allowing visitors from metropolitan areas to get a first-hand look at how farmers and graziers are living and working towards sustainable farming.

Advice to others

It has been a success and members say much of this is attributed to good communication between members, despite the distances between them.

It is important to focus on the 'big picture' for the group and acknowledging the assets of other members. Each member has something to contribute and meetings should allow all members to have their say and new ideas should be valued.

Many recommendations are by word of mouth from travellers who have visited a member, or members, of the network.

Other advice includes:

- Build market awareness of the unique opportunity of your scheme.
- Extend the range of marketing materials and develop an efficient and effective distribution system for information.



The Imperial Hotel in Broken Hill

- Develop intra-network referrals to take part in co-operative marketing programs
- Provide up to date information about your service, for example maps and events.
- One of the key strategies in establishing Outback Beds was the development of the website which contains links to each property in the network and links to official tourism sites.
- A 1800 number where all travellers' enquiries can be made for all members.
- Ongoing administration takes a lot of time, new ideas and initiative.
- Strengthen relationships with key industry partners including local tourism managers, tour operators, visitor information centres and related industry organisations – in this case Tourism NSW. Make sure that others promoting your business are doing it in a way that fits with your ideals.

Challenges have included putting ideas into practice – which can be the greatest hurdle for anyone taking on a new initiative.

“At meetings, people get really enthusiastic and come up with great ideas and good intentions, however when you get back home and the daily routine begins, it can be hard to maintain the level of enthusiasm. Putting ideas into practice can be quite a challenge,” Beverley said.

Monitoring quality assurance is important and was not something initially considered in the development plan. While there are standards, sometimes difficult to verbalise, a major aspect of the criteria for membership is encapsulated in the motto “Staying in The Outback with friends” which speaks for itself. There is a certain level of hospitality that is needed to be part of an initiative like Outback Beds.

Contact

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RED EARTH COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



Qld Rural Regional and Remote Women's Network members working toward building a community foundation: Karen Seiler, Mandy Bishop and Claire Kapernick.

Introduction

Qld Rural Regional and Remote Women's Network (QRRRWN) Barambah Branch and the South Burnett Community Foundation aim to research and take the first steps to establish a community foundation in the South Burnett region of Queensland.

The QRRRWN Barambah Branch has seed funding they wish to use to provide a legacy for the region – the Foundation will establish a corpus of funding which enables the community to respond to and resolve challenges and maximise opportunities in the future.

This funding was to engage more widely and explore the possibilities with the broader community.

A community foundation is a philanthropic organisation that builds a community's capacity for self-help – it can provide funds address community needs and facilitate partnerships between groups in a community to find solutions to local issues. It is a community-based charitable organisation which develops the community's capacity for independence and self-reliance.

A community foundation can help a community to help itself on an ongoing basis, is governed by local directors and pro bono professionals, and has its roots in the community in which it is based – no two look the same.

Impetus

By establishing a community foundation in the South Burnett, we hope to achieve the following:

- Make grants to carefully selected local projects
- Build long and short term philanthropic funds by developing philanthropy within the community

- Create partnerships between community organisations, local businesses, government agencies and individuals for the benefit of the local community
- Gain skills and experience through participation in the foundation itself – via funded projects and through training and pilot programs
- Build a stronger community through the use and involvement of local people, local ideas and local solutions to meet local needs.

The impetus for this foundation came from the vision of members of QRRRWN who had a significant sum invested from fundraising efforts they had conducted over a period of three years. Rather than use these funds on day to day activities, there was a desire to create some sort of legacy for their efforts, hence this is the seed funding (\$11,000) for the foundation's corpus.

QRRRWN members Karen Seiler and Georgie Somerset believe the establishment of a foundation creates an opportunity for others in the South Burnett to contribute in a meaningful way to provide an enduring legacy for generations to come.

Although the idea had been floated at times, the crystallisation of the foundation vision occurred at the Sustaining Rural Communities conference in Narrabri hosted by the Cotton CRC, when Karen heard both Sylvia Adnams and Georgie Speak about community foundations and what they can achieve.

There is no such mechanism at the moment in the region, and responses to needs falls back on government agencies (especially local government), service clubs, external charities, grant funding and an ad hoc approach to disasters.

Tools

The financial support of the Sustaining Rural Communities committee gave the coordinators the momentum and impetus to pursue this project and it became a priority in their lives, ensuring action was taken and followed up.

The coordinators benefited from the support of a paid administration person, and the community will benefit in the long run as a Community Foundation is established. Administrative support has now is now shared as we work through establishing the Community Foundation, and effective transitional arrangements are in place.

An ongoing working group has now evolved, conversations have been had in the wider community and continued effort is being put into ensuring a clear communication piece is developed for the community to understand the role and function of the Foundation.

The establishment of a foundation requires pro bono support of legal and accounting professionals, who have access to assistance through Freehills pro bono service as well.

Dedication of individuals who are willing to have the conversations with key community sectors and individuals is critical and a willingness to turn up, contribute and maintain momentum. To establish a corpus, there is fundraising required, but in the initial stages, it is the seed funding at critical times that assist the community to take the next step – breaking it down into steps and taking each one as it comes.

It takes time – to meet, listen, share and plan.

Outcomes

The project coordinators – Karen Seiler, president of the Barambah Branch QRRRWV and Georgie Somerset, President of QRRRWV, called a meeting of the wider community, involving local government, business, community, industry and other not for profit organisations. This group has now met several times and in March 2011 coordinated a visit to two community foundations in South East Queensland at Buderim and Ipswich.

This was followed by a visit in April 2011 to the South Burnett by the chair of Australian Community Philanthropy and the Stand Like Stone Foundation in SA, Sue Charlton, and the chair of the Broken Hill Community Foundation, Vince Gauci. This visit gave an opportunity for the broader community to be involved and a dinner and breakfast meeting were held with more 50 people attending these events.

A clearer vision of the way forward has now been developed with strong community and industry ownership of the project. The working group has continued to meet on a monthly basis and the company “Red Earth Community Foundation” is now being registered and governance arrangements formalised.

“Our initial launch and fundraising will occur in 2012 – the launch of the name and logo will coincide with the Down to

Earth Ball in November, featuring South Burnett ‘exports’,” said Georgie Somerset.

“We have registered an expression of interest with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) for assistance with establishing a community foundation.

“Our working group continues to include local government, state and federal agency representatives, industry (including Stanwell Corporation), service sector, business owners and committed individuals who believe in a strong future for the community.”

A community not for profit organisation has funded the legal costs (company registration etc) of establishing the Foundation – between \$1000 and \$2000; and also funded the travel costs for the visiting speakers in April 2011 (approximately \$1000).

Advice to others

“Establishing a Community Foundation is not for everyone, but if you have a vision to see your region sustain itself, become increasingly self-reliant, capture its best and brightest exports for future opportunities and provide a leadership pathway for community members, then have a go!” Georgie and Karen say.

To go through this process you need a supportive working group, tenacity and patience, as it takes time for a community to catch the vision of what a foundation can do and achieve.

“Don’t go in thinking you know how it should be done – sit and the table and ask the questions,” they said.

“Take time for others to catch the vision – the ones that matter will! Work with those who can see the vision – you will build on each other’s enthusiasm.

“When engaging in a community project at a broad scale, don’t be afraid to just do it and remember to take the vision of a few and be brave enough to expand it to become the vision of many.”

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FUNDING CONTACTS

There is a lot on the internet which can help communities help themselves. Some possible funding starting points include:

Fundbase www.fundbase.com.au

Grant Guru www.government-grant.com.au/

Arts Grants australia.gov.au/topics/culture-history-and-sport/arts/arts-grants

Grants Link www.grantslink.gov.au

www.ourcommunity.com.au

www.grantsearch.com.au

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