

REGREENING OUR PART OF AUSTRALIA: PUTTING PEOPLE IN THE PICTURE FORESTS, TREES, PEOPLE AND FIRE - 26 MAY 2003 UNIVERSITY HOUSE, ANU

I am talking here today in a voluntary capacity with Greening Australia. I was asked to talk about 'regreening' – a curious term which has crept into the ACT Budget papers, but which might mean very different things to different people.

Firstly, a little context to set the tone for later remarks. Greening Australia arose in 1982 in a climate of growing alarm at changes in Australian landscapes, most readily evident in tree decline. Those community concerns led to an Australian Year of the Tree, and in turn a National Tree Program.

Greening Australia was born of those early efforts to tackle the emerging problems at a national scale. And it has continued to respond to community concerns, through a succession of Federal, State and Territory government initiatives, commercial operations, sponsorship and occasional philanthropy. This spread of support has evolved as concern has escalated. More and more people are recognising that the landscape has been changing too fast over too wide an area, and not for the better.

The language has also changed – it's no longer just about trees; we have biodiversity, salinity, water quality, carbon sequestration, sustainability, and natural and cultural heritage to build in to our objectives, and these are to be balanced across environmental, societal, and economic considerations. And we now operate also in the realm of youth and community development.

We find ourselves pursuing these multiple objectives in a wide range of settings – from urban school grounds to farm forestry plantations, Aboriginal communities, native forest, woodland, grassland and wetland remnants, and revegetation for infrastructure projects. We work on a range of levels and scales from the micro and specific on individual blocks to the macro and strategic in whole local government areas, or whole landscapes and catchments.

It has become a lot more complicated, but Greening Australia has become a key player by being an honest broker that can get behind the farm gate, and work directly with all types of communities, in a way that government agencies generally cannot do. Our community engagement approach addresses motivation, knowledge and capacity – through which we bring to landscape solutions a unique mix of passion, practicality and partnership.

We started off planting trees but talk now of changing lives and landscapes – so our view of ‘regreening’ is working with people and communities to create working landscapes that are vital, productive and sustainable.

As we look back during current celebrations of Greening Australia’s 21st birthday, it is clear that most of our past work has been carried out in the face of a steady decline in landscape values, as the land use and management errors of nearly two centuries came home to roost. But here today we are talking of a landscape – and lives – that changed dramatically, even cataclysmically, not over a century or even over years, but effectively in one day.

Greening Australia’s response here was immediate. Some of our staff played key (and valiant) roles in volunteer bushfire brigades in those fateful days. We had partnerships - and decades of history - with a large number of rural landholders, and all our staff and a number of volunteers swung into action to help with clean-up, emergency fencing, restoring a semblance of order to properties that had been blitzed. In the ensuing weeks we witnessed first hand the pain, the loss and the grief inflicted by the trilogy of drought, then fire, then flood.

So we come at this issue not, as some might expect, from some precious or purist, ‘greenie’ viewpoint seeking vegetation for vegetation’s sake, or forests for forests’ sake, but from a firm grounding in the community and in a host of personal realities that arise from trying to lead productive lives in the Australian landscape.

We also come to the ‘regreening’ issue with a grounding in science, through our partnership with CSIRO, including a joint project ‘Landscapes under fire’ to monitor

recovery after the Canberra fires in January this year. It is clear that much of the landscape that changed so dramatically at that time cannot just be left to its own devices to 'come good'. It requires active intervention now – it requires sound decision-making and priority setting. These in turn need to be based on diagnosing and seeking to meet the greatest possible range of community needs and expectations across the environmental, societal and economic corners of the sustainability triangle.

We will be hearing much about learning from the past. Let's not confine that to fire management aspects as we develop our collective approach to the makeup of the new landscape. In particular, I would urge a holistic approach along the lines sought by the National Capital Open Space System of the 1980's and 90's. At the same time let's not repeat some of the less helpful abstractions of that system - for example, we can do better than to treat rural leases as land waiting for a worthwhile use or as foreground to nice scenery.

We will have a reasonably clean slate – let's consider all the spaces from the suburban to the remote as parts of an integrated complex, and let's create places that offer a correspondingly wide range of opportunities for the community. I don't mean some neat and highly engineered gradation of uses, more a vaguely anarchistic mosaic with some hard edges and stark contrasts. Walter Burley Griffin might agree with me on that.

Whatever the final makeup of the new landscape complex, Greening Australia stands ready to play its part in ensuring that it is a working landscape full of life – producing a wide range of community benefits: places designed for living, playing and enjoying; places designed for production; places designed for protecting natural and cultural heritage, supporting biodiversity, reducing salinity, enhancing water quality, and for that matter sequestering carbon. Mitigation of fire impacts is also certain to be significant in shaping options and decisions.

'Regreening' will be a major factor in achieving these, and decisions will need to be made about the right vegetation species in the right places, the right

combinations and techniques to achieve the desired results. We have often helped to shape these kinds of decisions in rejuvenating landscapes, and will readily contribute to the renewed Canberra and broader ACT landscape in the same way.

But I am not going to talk in detail about those here; rather, I will talk about some of the other, less obvious, aspects to bringing life to landscapes because it is these aspects that past approaches have largely tripped over or perhaps ignored.

The January fires drove home just how far removed our urban community has become from the reality of living in or near rural and forest landscapes.

We saw how few people were in any way prepared.

We saw how little people understood.

We saw how reliant we had become on too few resources.

If an antidote is needed, I believe that it lies in creating a landscape with which the community is facilitated to engage actively – not only as users, but as managers, as planners and policy makers, and as stakeholders in the broadest sense.

A landscape which the community prizes, with heads, hearts and hands – heads on a knowledge level, hearts on a motivation level, and hands on a capacity level.

Not just in design stages, but in implementation and on-going management.

And woven right through all the landscapes that we are seeking to redesign, from the suburban, through the peri-urban to the rural and relatively remote.

Yes, we already have Parkcare, Landcare, Paddock Care, Waterwatch, and Friends of... groups. And Greening Australia works productively with all such groups - they are great people doing great work, and offer a core of highly dedicated volunteers.

But where can it be argued that they are enough in themselves?

To what extent are they relics of government agency structures?

Are they too compartmentalised to be effective at a landscape scale?

Do they leave gaps begging to be plugged e.g. community care for plantation forests? suburban volunteer bush fire brigades?

We need to avoid piecemeal investment in community engagement that offers tantalising promise but delivers less than the task requires. I would like to see these groups built into a more comprehensive guiding framework for ‘re-greening’ the whole complex of landscapes. A framework that assists due consideration to the human and community dimensions of decision-making and priority-setting.

I am particularly pleased to see the involvement here today of health professionals because I believe that the community health sector offers those of us in other professional sectors some very useful lessons and frameworks.

Take for example the key strategies of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion of 1986, which approaches ‘health’ as synonymous with ‘quality of life’:

- building healthy public policy – so that all policy makers are aware of the health consequences of their decisions and accept responsibility
- creating supportive environments
- strengthening community action
- developing personal skills; and
- reorienting services to open channels between the health sector and broader social, political, economic and physical environmental components.

This kind of framework would assist us to approach our task with a renewed vision not far removed from the Garden City ideal that so inspired Walter Burley Griffin – where there was recognition that all the land was owned by the community and was designed and managed with that ownership in mind.

In today’s less idealistic terms, we might see ourselves as a corporate entity responsible to all our shareholders (the ACT community) to be making a return that benefits all our shareholders. At the same time we understand each entity has responsibilities beyond itself to a broader constituency (the Australian community) that has a stake in the entity’s viability and continued strength.

Creation of a new kind of landscape complex invested with comprehensive community engagement – now, wouldn’t that be a fitting and exciting challenge to

take up as part of the celebration of Canberra's centenary in 2013?! Rewriting the concept of a Bush Capital, People's Capital, Heart of the Nation indeed.

But what governance do we need to have in place to ensure the kind of accountability that this entails?

What do we actually need to do to encourage our shareholders and those broader stakeholders to be a vital part of building viability and strength? To be among the active producers, instead of being passive and disabled consumers?

Looking back again for a moment, we can only speculate about what different outcomes might have resulted on 18 January if members of the Canberra community had been more aware of the risks and consequences, more knowledgeable about what was happening and what was at stake, had more skills and equipment to look after themselves and their neighbours, and had the culture – indeed the habit – of participation to have been playing active roles.

But whose responsibility is it to enable and to build that awareness, that knowledge, those skills and that culture of participation? I would say Ours collectively, recognising that artificial distinctions are distractions. We as professionals are the community too – just as all drivers are also pedestrians.

Out of the January fires we saw strengths in the Canberra community that surprised many of us. I hope that we can continue to surprise ourselves at what can be achieved when we commit as professionals to enabling the community. I assure you that Greening Australia will be right there in the thick of it – we will be growing the future together.

Thank you

Mark Butz

PO Box 128 JAMISON CENTRE ACT 2614 0418-417-635

mark.butz@bigpond.com