



CLEA: Community Learning for Environmental Action

*Peer learning and mentoring
across community environment groups*



How knowledge moves and support flows in the Landcare community

In 2016-17, CLEA visited Victorian Landcare Council delegates in the Corangamite and Goulburn Broken regions to find out what they think will support knowledge sharing in their Landcare communities. They were all Landcare members with many years experience. Here are the findings and the implications for supporting peer learning in Landcare.

Knowledge and support move through social networks

1. *Landcare knowledge moves through networks.* Community Landcare is a web of the social networks between landcarers. They are independent people who value what they can share and learn from other landcarers. You can't command Landcarers to share knowledge, but you can *support* them to do what they themselves want to do. Nor can you command staff in government programs to offer support and information. You can put it in their job description, but it's the personal connections they cultivate that allow them to share expertise.
2. *Landcare combines local community networks with wider technical networks.* Local community Landcare groups call on local community networks. As a collective endeavour, Landcare Networks build local community networks into landscape-scale networks, and connect to the technical expertise of Catchment Management Authorities, government agencies, and private consultants. The taproot for Landcare is local communities—if these networks wither, the game's over. But Landcare needs the knowledge held in technical networks, and maintaining connections to technical expertise is a major challenge now that government staff are spread thin on the ground and change jobs often.
3. *There's plenty of information coming through newsletters and websites.* People scan group and network newsletters because they're interested in what's happening locally, but they don't necessarily know what's happening beyond their group or Network. And newsletters and websites move around *information* about who is doing what. They don't so readily move knowledge about why things work or don't work. When people are only tuned into local activity, they miss opportunities to be inspired by and learn from what works in the wider Landcare community.
4. *Knowledge flows person-to-person, in relationships of respect.* Knowledge is the understanding of how to apply general principles and practices to fit *your* circumstances. It grows through personal experience, and because social knowledge in Landcare is tacit, not explicit (it's inside people, not written down) a good conversation *with a person with experience* is the best way to get that knowledge. Landcarers look for people who respect what they know, don't treat them like idiots, and are willing to collaborate. They won't approach or persist unless there's that feeling of equality and commitment.



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5. *Face-to-face gatherings build up networks.* People's preferred route when they are looking for help is to go to someone they know. Face-to-face gatherings with downtime to meet others in Landcare are incredibly valuable. Local gatherings are the most common—committee meetings, planting days, farmers' markets. Field days bring together people from further afield. Facilitators and Chairs have formal gatherings, but ideas and relationships don't necessarily filter down to members.
6. *Network Weavers are at the heart of moving knowledge and support in Landcare.* Knowing the right people is as important as what you know. It takes skill to find people and then to build reciprocity (giving as much as you get) and trust (knowing that the other person is looking out for your interests). *Network Weavers* invest in building up their networks, and they share their connections with others:

"John, I think you'll be interested in what Deborah has been doing. Deborah, John was telling me last week about a new project that sounds just like what you've been doing."

Network Weavers know that a contact shared keeps the world moving in the right direction, and is credit to call on in the future.

7. *Community Landcare members often don't think their skills and expertise are significant.* Country people are modest and don't like to big note themselves. Volunteers don't always think their skills or knowledge are that important: Network Weavers recognise people's knowledge and competence, and invite them to share that with others.
8. *People ask for help from people they know.* Most don't go to someone they don't know to ask for help—they go through the people they know. Network Weavers are influential again, because they are known locally and they know a lot of people. Landcare members got to them for a connection.
9. *Facilitators and some community members are well placed to be Network Weavers.* Network building is an attitude and a set of skills, and it takes time. Facilitators have a job that lets them meet people. Some Landcare members have connections built up through decades, locally and to technical networks, and their knowledge of local networks stays even when facilitators move on.

12 things that Network Weavers do

1. *Network Weavers know their local networks.* They know who has expertise and is willing to share it. They keep in touch with key knowledge holders, so when they need to call on someone, that person feels comfortable sharing their expertise.
2. *Network Weavers go hunting.* Network Builders aren't put off by gaps or lacks in who they know—they go hunting. NRM is a big field. It requires knowledge and experience across conservation, land management, agriculture, community organising and advocacy. No one person can hold all that knowledge, but a network between many people can. Network Weavers invest time in looking for expertise in each specialisation in NRM.
3. *Network Weavers are powered by big ideas.* They keep in mind the big idea behind what they are doing, like educating children or improving food or creating viable landscapes. That big



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idea allows them to look for the potential in social networks wider than NRM. It emboldens them to approach people they don't know, start a conversation, and see what comes out of it.

4. *Network Weavers look for solid technical expertise **and** people skills.* A person can be an expert, but too busy or too blunt for someone who needs help thinking about what they need, or who isn't familiar with a field. But a straight technician might be just what another person needs. A Network Weaver tunes into the person.
5. *Network Weavers put relationships first.* In their network of connections, they actively express their appreciation of what each person can contribute, and they give positive feedback as each makes a contribution. And they don't let the task of running projects get in the way of people enjoying each others' company. They know that the camaraderie in relationships is the lifeblood of voluntary effort, and they keep the social side of the work strong, for others and for themselves.
6. *Network Weavers give generously.* They are passionate and willing to work hard to make things happen. That commitment is visible to others. When they ask people to contribute, they have already set an example. When others ask for help, they give generously from their own experience and their networks.
7. *Network Weavers make direct requests.* They ask for what they and their projects need, and they say how that help will make a difference. They leave it open for the others to decide—they don't second guess what's possible. If a person can't help, they ask who that person knows who might have what is needed.
8. *Network Weavers make the most of their organisational base.* Their affiliation with their organisation (and sometimes several different organisations) gives them legitimacy. They are a facilitator of a Landcare Network. They are the Secretary of a Landcare Group. As they reach out to people, they let them know where they are coming from personally *and* organisationally. Their affiliation locates them in social space and give them more than a personal reason to be asking questions.
9. *Network Weavers keep in touch ...* but what is the best way to keep in touch? A text? An email? A phone call? Each person has different preferences, and Network Builders don't assume the same approach will work with everyone. They're wary of overloading people. They use "reply", "reply all", cc, and bcc thoughtfully. They use the phone a lot.
10. *Network Weavers make time to talk face-to-face.* They drop in, they have coffee, they walk the main street and stop and yarn even when they're busy. They don't begrudge time chatting at the supermarket.
11. *Network Weavers follow up.* Was the suggested contact useful? What's happened since the last conversation? Network Builders follow up on the technical issues *and* the personal issues.
12. *Network Weavers have good systems.* They keep track of their contacts, either in their head or in records. They keep track of emails. They choose their digital systems, learn how to use them, and maintain them.



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Five ways to strengthen regional scale knowledge sharing

1. Understand and support the Network Weavers

Who are the Network Weavers? How they do what they do? What support do they need? How can their skills be passed on to others?

2. Create forums where people meet face-to-face

A forum is different to a meeting: it's a place where people can talk face-to-face about what works and what doesn't, and why. Facilitators and Chairs of Networks have official meetings, most often organised by their region's CMA. As a consequence, their meeting time tends to be consumed by official business as the CMA sees it. They need to set their own agenda and make time to raise their own questions, discuss their concerns and listen to each others' their stories.

Committees of management of Landcare Networks and of groups don't have many chances to meet each other. They need to. They need places to talk with people like themselves about what's working for them, and what's difficult, in the business of Landcare. This will broaden their knowledge and networks, and strengthen their management. LVI's regional Forums are one place Landcare members can talk with each other at depth, and this opportunity needs to be made even more effective.

3. Profile the people behind innovations

There are many local group and Network newsletters, with news about what's happening and good technical information. What staff and Landcare members need are more stories about *the people behind innovations in Landcare*, and more discussion of what works in successful projects and why it works.

Innovators are known by reputation locally, but not necessarily beyond their local area. They are innovators not just in land management, but in organising, collaborating and influencing. Their personal stories show other landcarers what is possible. How can their stories be spread around? Face-to-face gatherings between Landcare members at regional scale would give these people a platform, and published stories could profile them, but both avenues could make more of the person behind the innovation. Regional forums could carve out a stream for personal stories, to balance the focus on projects. Published stories could profile the innovator behind the innovation.

At present, published stories concentrate on describing improvements in land management. For example, the GBCMA website has [21 case studies](#) on the outcomes of NRM work. The stories set out the biophysical side of each situation, but say only a little about the motivations and personal journey of the protagonists. Stories that include the blood, sweat and tears required to achieve the result would give the other half of the story.

The same observation applies to the Victorian Landcare magazine: in a quick count in 2017 of five editions of the Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management Magazine, less than 1 in 10 stories had a strong focus on the person behind the project. Newsletters, magazines and websites should be windows into innovation in Landcare, profiling real life people in enough detail to allow the reader to decide "Yes, I want to talk that person!" Profiling the innovators is something VLC delegates in each region might pursue with their CMA



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4. A website to search for what works in Landcare

The web has opened so many doors, it's difficult to find what's relevant. What if people in Landcare put forward what they know works in Landcare, and gave the link to where to find more? That is the idea behind the Landcare Share Centre, which is gathering gems from the Landcare community—people, ideas and resources that demonstrated effectiveness. And it's the idea behind the CLEA website, which concentrates on Landcare's social knowledge.

5. Develop the skills of Committees of Management and facilitators in producing newsletters, websites, email lists and stories

The Internet and computer software has made life simultaneously easier and more difficult. The volume of information has increased by orders of magnitude and people's expectations are much higher. To get the right mix of channels and put out the stories that make information meaningful, we need to keep skilling from the local committee level outwards. A first step is to showcase Landcare people with skills in communication, and work out way for others to get support from them when they need it.

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The CLEA Project