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## Community-led land management: historical perspectives, future prospects

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### ABSTRACT

This study introduces community-led land management (CLLM) as a unifying concept, drawn from an environmental history perspective, that both researchers and community members might use in analysis and reflection on land management activities carried out by communities in connection with place. By exploring the histories of three otherwise disparate case studies in south-western Australia – a catchment group, an Indigenous ranger group and an urban bushland friends group – we draw attention to common attributes of community leadership and co-operative, hands-on work in and for a defined geographical area. These case studies also suggest a trend toward increasingly structured controls within the movement, with neoliberal regulation and accountability tending to obscure community origins. While inclusive of many landcare activities, CLLM can be understood as a broader social movement covering diverse groupings, where communities continue both to lead and apply their place-specific knowledge and labour. This social movement is of crucial importance for effectively tackling the escalating environmental problems in Australia and elsewhere.

### KEYWORDS

History; land management; landcare; Indigenous rangers; urban bushland; community

## Introduction

Australian environments have long been managed by groups of knowledgeable local people. For much of the continent's human history, land managers' approaches were both productive and sustainable (Rose 1996). During the great rupture of colonisation, settlers destroyed much of this capacity, but in recent decades both settler and Indigenous Australians have organised in local groups to care for the land. While this has not reversed the history of dispossession and environmental degradation, damage to the landscapes and environments of modern Australia has been mitigated by the consistent work of those within a social movement we term 'community-led land management' (CLLM). This movement includes, but is not limited to, the 'Friends of local bushland who keep weeds at bay and re-vegetate damaged land; the coastcarers maintaining dunes in the face of storms and vandals; the landcare groups planting trees and collectively developing sustainable ways to farm; and, in many areas, the Indigenous people who have been able to return as rangers to their original land management roles. We

propose that CLLM should be understood as a diverse yet coherent social movement, within a broader historical perspective. Yet we are lacking a coherent picture of the emergence of grassroots land management efforts and how they have evolved in changing historical contexts.

In an influential 2009 article, Hajkowicz proposed three historical phases of the Australian Government's natural resource management programs. His first phase, from around 1990–1996, involved building public awareness and capacity among community groups through the National Landcare Program. Although providing limited evidence, Hajkowicz suggested that questions were raised about whether the program was effectively addressing land degradation issues. The Commonwealth government subsequently ushered in phase two, with the National Heritage Trust 1 program announced in 1996, through which more formal catchment and regional arrangements were encouraged. The National Heritage Trust 2 program (2002–2003 to 2007–2008), together with funding from the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (2000–2008), saw the establishment of some 56 Natural Resource Management (NRM) regions across Australia, with differing arrangements in each state across a spectrum from state agency-based arrangements through to organisations legally independent of government, though still reliant on government funding. Hajkowicz suggested that the seeds for the third phase were sown in the early 2000s with market-based instruments programs through which landholders were paid directly for providing 'environmental and social services related to agricultural landscapes' (Hajkowicz 2009, 475). This was framed as part of a broader transition towards a system of contracts based on fee-for-service (476). Increasingly the focus was on efficient targeting of investment, aligned with measurable outcomes and clearer lines of management control. While serviceable as a broad chronology of significant milestones that usefully signals the neoliberalisation of the sector, Hajkowicz's 2009 historical overview only briefly notes the substantial early growth of soil conservation, landcare and other forms of CLLM in the previous decade. Furthermore, it only captures the national government's perspective. More detailed historical case studies are needed to understand the potential of CLLM to effect environmental change, and the barriers to realising this potential across different spatial and temporal scales, and across this diverse movement. We propose that a more critical historical approach, and the broader framing of CLLM, can provide the basis for understanding the nature of community leadership in this crucial sector, and the way it has responded to changing social, economic and political contexts over time.

In this article we define CLLM, outline its diversity within the Australian context, and test the utility of the concept on three case study groups with the crucial common features of being led by local communities and involving cooperative, hands-on land management as their primary activity. From an environmental history perspective we argue that the novel category of 'community-led land management' enables us to better understand a diverse social movement that has previously only been researched in a fragmented way. Regarding CLLM groups as parts of a larger movement, a focus on community leadership, and approaching this movement from a historical perspective, will enable both researchers and the community to better understand the significance of CLLM and the ways in which it has adapted to changing social and political circumstances. Such histories will also enable the individual organisations within the movement to better understand their shifting relationship with each other and with government,

and enable groups, researchers, and government agencies to better understand these organisations as part of a large and diverse yet connected movement.

After providing a working definition of CLLM, a review of historical approaches to land management is followed by a brief methodology for investigating the three case studies. The discussion of each case is used to draw out themes in the history of CLLM.

## **A working definition of community-led land management**

We propose that although they are diverse, CLLM groups have three linked features in common that distinguish them from regional, national and international environment and conservation organisations: firstly, a ‘hands-on’ approach among members; secondly, an ongoing core focus on a particular geographical area, which may range from a small patch of local urban bushland to a river catchment or large tract of pastoral country; and thirdly an inclusive and cooperative approach to working together as a community, that contrasts strongly with the more hierarchical approach of both government-led and corporate not-for-profit initiatives.

Any definition of community-led land management requires first considering ‘community’. Community originally described a group of people living in a defined geographical area (location), but ideas such as ‘post-place community’ (Bradshaw 2008) have arisen to describe forms of community that are not dependent on location, focussing on the connections between people over their connections to a place. In CLLM the location or place is the focus of attention and groups typically include location information in their names to reflect this. Repeated hands-on activity in a specific location imbued with meaning creates the ‘place’ of significance for these groups (Cresswell 2008; Ingold 2011). For some groups, members do indeed come from a geographically located community such as adjoining farms or a country town. For others, the community is shaped by shared interest and dedication to the specific place, with members travelling from different locations. While there are limits to the distance members can travel to carry out hands-on activities, travelling long distances is common in Australia. A member of a water catchment community-led land management group might drive hundreds of kilometres to join other members at a meeting, while a member of an urban bushland friends group might catch the bus across suburbs to join others at a community planting day. Despite this variability, the concept of community in connection with place is central to the definition of CLLM and excludes larger community of interest groupings that include multiple locations, particularly where these are formed for administrative or management reasons external to those areas as a ‘place’. Community-led land management can be defined as *co-operative, ongoing, hands-on work driven by local community interest to maintain and improve a particular geographical area.*

## **Historical perspectives**

Before discussing the three case study groups, we contextualise this new movement category through a brief review of concepts related to CLLM. We consider landcare as a form of CLLM deserving of more recognition for its community leadership, noting its distinction from the government programs addressed by Hajkovicz (2009), and present relevant historical research on landcare and other forms of land management

led by communities. The relationship between CLLM and neoliberalism is also outlined to facilitate analysis of the case study groups.

There are long-established and effective traditions of community leadership in managing and governing natural resources. Ostrom (1990) demonstrated the ability of some groups to establish effective and enduring institutions for managing common-pool resources. Ostrom's research related to resources like fisheries that are subtractible (that is, diminish with use), whereas some forms of land management are better regarded as producing public goods. The research nevertheless underlines the capacity for local actors to self-organise around collective problems, which is fundamental to CLLM.

'Community-based natural resource management' (CBNRM), defined by Uphoff (1998) is another approach that 'recognizes and reinforces the stakeholder role of people living in, on and around vulnerable natural resources, both for these people's sake and for that of future generations, for people living in the immediate area but also in the rest of the country and the rest of the world' (4). Arising out of difficulties in achieving conservation aims in development contexts, where such aims were not supported by local people, CBNRM represented a shift toward integrating conservation and development goals 'by focusing on the needs, interests, knowledge, values and capabilities of local populations' (Uphoff 1998, 15). Subsequently taken up in developed economic contexts also, Armitage (2005, 704) explained that CBNRM 'requires some degree of devolution of decision-making power and authority over natural resources to communities and community-based organizations' but also noted that new organisational arrangements are required to achieve the desired economic outcomes. Whereas CBNRM initiatives are often initiated and led by external organisations, albeit with the aim of building local capacity and promoting devolved responsibility for land management, CLLM takes community leadership as its starting point and central organising principle. It also recognises that communities are often concerned for the intrinsic values of the local landscape, rather than the more utilitarian focus of CBNRM.

Landcare, as a community movement, is a significant component of CLLM in Australia but is difficult to define precisely. Writing at the end of the Decade of Landcare, Cary and Webb (2000) noted that landcare meant different things to different people, and distinguished between the National Landcare Program (a Government funding program), community landcare (the network of voluntary community groups) and the landcare movement (individuals and organisations who are concerned about land degradation and subscribe to a landcare ethic). Almost 20 years later, Ottenson (2019) continued to support a differentiation between Landcare (the national program) and landcare (the movement). Diverse authors have lauded the grass-roots origins of the landcare movement, outlining how local groups self-organised around land and water degradation issues, harnessed the community spirit and eventually acquired funding (Macleod 2019; Robins 2018; Tennent and Lockie 2013; Salt 2016). These authors concluded that collaborative community efforts are central to landcare's definition and continued survival. Colliver (2011) and Curtis and Lockwood (2010) similarly placed the community at the heart of the landcare movement, yet these authors also recognised the changing nature of landcare over time. Curtis et al. (2014) additionally recognised the complex relationship between community and locality.

While landcare has been the subject of scholarly research from sociological perspectives (e.g. Lockie 2004; Lockie and Vanclay 1997), historical research has been largely

confined to individual groups or projects (e.g. Barwick 2008; Bradby 1997; Pilgrim 2015), or celebratory works, often produced for anniversary purposes, largely comprising collated primary sources such as oral histories and written recollections (Youl 2006; Youl, Marriott, and Nabben 2006).

The extant histories of the landcare movement find little agreement not only on the origins of landcare, but how the model, approach and philosophy have evolved over the years. Both Macleod (2019) and Colliver (2011) focus on the positive elements of the history and the achievements of the movement. Macleod (2019) tells the historical narrative through the eyes of individual community and group members in order to highlight the importance of the community in the development of landcare, while Colliver (2011) praises the community achievements of landcare, but also emphasises the role of the government agencies in sparking discussion on land management.

Looking beyond landcare, Ross et al. (2009) have linked the emergence of co-management and Indigenous Protected Area management in Australia with the rise of Aboriginal land rights, and briefly traced their evolution over time. Kay and Lester (1997) situated the emergence of Coastcare – just two years into the federal government starting their Landcare program – within a broader history of coastal management, while Clarke (2006) undertook a retrospective analysis of the operation of Coastcare during its short existence as a federal government program (see also Clarke 2008), concluding that the program was never adequately evaluated but understanding its history is essential if we are to achieve more effective coastal policy. Stenhouse (2001) provides a rare study of the role of community groups in urban bushland management but captures a snapshot in time rather than insights into changing dynamics. Broader scholarly histories of pro-environmental action and advocacy touch on the Australian landcare movement but provide limited analysis (Barr and Cary 1992; Mulligan and Hill 2001). Using CLLM as an overarching movement category provides the opportunity to focus on the shared attributes that can be obscured as the political environment changes.

One of the key issues that can be traced through historical analysis of CLLM is its relationship with neoliberalism. In a survey of research on the neoliberalisation of nature, Castree identifies as an ‘ideal-typical’ feature of neoliberalism the ‘state-led encouragement of civil society groups (charities, not-for-profits, ‘communities’, etc.) to provide services that interventionist states did, or could potentially provide for citizens’ (Castree 2008, 142–143). Remediation of environmental degradation is one such service and CLLM provides a fertile field for exploring how this feature operates in complex real-world situations. In relation to the landcare movement, significant support from some state governments underpinned its early growth. Then came greater national support, including a 1989 announcement by the Commonwealth Government of a ‘Decade of Landcare’ in Australia, and – after joint lobbying by conservation and farming lobby groups – a 1992 Commonwealth decision to establish a Landcare funding program. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s there was rapid growth in the number of landcare and other CLLM groups, particularly in rural areas. This coincided with a period when state agricultural and other agencies were still relatively well-funded, and willingly supplied considerable technical and operational support, leading to what was generally viewed as strong community-government partnerships (Youl 2006). However, reconstitution of rural Australia was also well underway through the twin forces of globalisation and neoliberalism (Tonts and Horsley 2019). As market reform removed agricultural

industry protections and agency funding and staff were reduced under the neo-liberal pressure for ‘small government’, rural dwellers were increasingly expected both to produce efficiently and to care for the environment (Dibden, Potter, and Cocklin 2009). New forms of regulation and surveillance, supposedly outside the state, were imposed. While these changes were promoted as empowering local communities, the expectation that rural dwellers work toward long-term, broader social and environmental benefits, even at their own cost, has proven problematic (Tonts and Horsley 2019).

Some authors have brought a historical sensibility to analysis of the relationship between landcare and neoliberalism. Salt (2016) identifies the cultivation of partnerships between individuals, landcare groups, and governments as ‘consistent with the government’s neoliberal agenda of shifting responsibilities from governments to communities and individuals’, and finds that over time, agri-environment policy ‘moved from cultivating an ethic rooted in collaboration, sharing, and volunteerism to a culture of cost-benefit analysis and fee for service’ (101–102). Robins (2007), too, identified neoliberalism as one of the paradigms that has crucially shaped landcare in Australia, through downsizing of government agencies, embedding principles of competition, focusing on economic valuations and market-based instruments, and implementing hyper-rigorous accountability. Duxbury traced the impact of neoliberalism on landcare as the most recent manifestation of a ‘mechanistic worldview that rests on the notion of progress as synonymous with economic growth, and individual gain as representative of whole-of-community wellbeing’ (Duxbury 2007, 101). Focussing on a case study of one rural catchment group, Tennent and Lockie (2013) showed that the erosion of community engagement resulted from goals set by neoliberal government programmes, including increasingly stringent funding requirements. Efficient, highly adaptable agricultural production and long-term biodiversity conservation sit uneasily in a neoliberal frame – but have all forms of CLLM been similarly affected, and developed similar responses?

Historical perspectives are crucial for understanding the impact of changing contexts – such as the intensifying neoliberal pressure on environmental management – on CLLM. Yet CLLM is at present quite difficult to study historically, as group priorities tend to be other than records management, so records can be lost or, if retained, difficult to access. The following historical case studies from three CLLM groups in south-western Australia draw on both documentary sources as well as participant observation and discussion with group leaders. They suggest that, while extant histories have identified some important themes, there is more to be revealed about changing relationships within and outside this broad social movement.

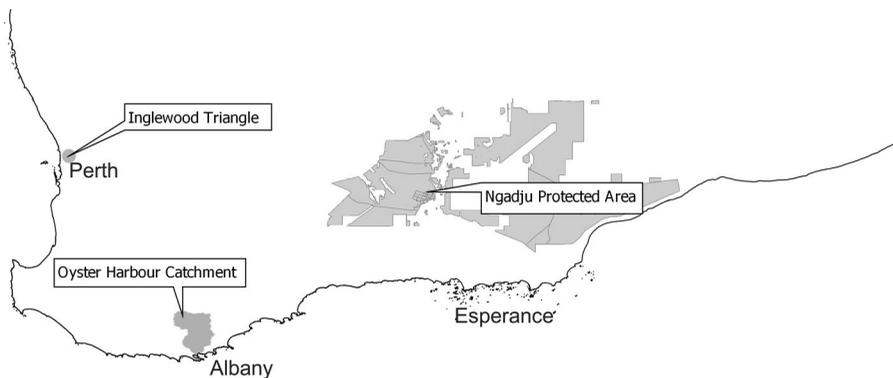
### **Case study methodology**

To test the concept of CLLM, three groups from south-western Australia were chosen to represent the diversity of scale and methods of operation that could be encountered: a catchment management group, an Indigenous ranger group and an urban bushland friends group (Table 1). A desktop comparison of the three groups preceded archival research using group records such as meeting minutes and website materials. Interviews were held with past and present leadership of the Oyster Harbour Catchment group and informal interviews with Ngadju Conservation and Friends of Inglewood Triangle leaders. Two authors contributed participant observations from their experience across

**Table 1.** Comparison of Community-led Land Management case study groups.

	Community-led Land Management group name		
	Oyster Harbour Catchment Group	Ngadju Conservation	Friends of Inglewood Triangle
Context	Rural/peri-urban	Rural	Urban
Management Area (1000 ha)	380	4400	0.0018
Governance	Incorporated	Incorporated	Non-incorporated
Paid staff	3	25	Nil
Volunteers	100	Nil	30

the three groups – one as a member, the other as a person who has worked closely with the informants. The development of each group was contextualised through relevant historical research. The location of each group is shown in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.** Location of three community-led land management groups in south-western Australia, Ngadju Protected Area, Oyster Harbour Catchment and Inglewood Triangle.

### Landcare at many scales: the Oyster Harbour Catchment Group

In Western Australia the first of what can be called the ‘modern’ era of landcare groups formed in 1983, as formal Soil Conservation Districts gazetted under the Soil and Land Conservation Act. By 1988 the movement had grown to over 90 groups, with claims that over 60 per cent of farmers and 90 per cent of pastoralists were involved in their local groups (Robertson 1988). While the essence of these early landcare groups was landholders working together with other landholders, government agencies were key players in their establishment and operations, providing funding, advice and support in coordinating activities. For example, WA Department of Agriculture officers functioned as ex-officio members of the local Land Conservation District Committees (LCDCs). Inland of Albany, Western Australia, four of these landholder-based LCDCs were established and functioning by the late 1980s, focused on issues such as salinity, soil acidification and wind erosion. Severe eutrophication problems, affecting the urban community in Albany, led to the state government establishing an Albany Harbours program and encouraging the LCDCs to work together over the Oyster Harbour catchment, which covers some 380,000 hectares and extends almost 100 kms inland from Albany, and includes both rural and urban areas ([Figure 1](#)).

In 1990, at the behest of the Manypeaks LCDC, a meeting was held at which a committee was formed ‘to oversee the management of the Kalgan and King River Catchment area’, the King and Kalgan Rivers being the major watercourses flowing into Oyster Harbour.<sup>1</sup> At the group’s inaugural meeting, it was noted that the committee ‘had no legislative direction and wished to work closely with farmers’; support was pledged from the Department of Agriculture.<sup>2</sup> The new committee initially styled itself the Oyster Harbour Catchment Committee, and quickly took on awareness-raising, research and coordination roles, growing in importance as the overall CLLM group for the entire catchment and moving to more hands-on roles in fencing, soil testing and water quality monitoring in particular. As the Oyster Harbour Catchment Group (OHCG) they have always worked closely with other organisations within the catchment: at first the LCDCs, and over time with groups focused on specific waterways, such as the King River Restoration Group and the Kalgan River Stewards, groups largely drawn from the urban population, such as the Friends of Emu Point, and similar rural groups such as the Friends of the Porongurup Range. The OHCG Committee over time has included representatives of such community groups and also of government departments.

Efforts to protect the waterways and improve management of the larger catchment since the 1980s have led to a dramatic improvement in the health of the catchment, the rivers and the Oyster Harbour (Department of Water and Environmental Regulation 2021). Most of the river and main streams are now fenced, soil testing to reduce fertiliser loss is now a common practice and many bushland areas have been fenced, protected from livestock and extended with revegetation. Downstream, the seagrass beds in Oyster Harbour have recovered (Cambridge, Bastyan, and Walker 2002) and there is little sign of the damaging macro algae that was present in the 1980s (Bennett et al. 2021).

As a catchment-sized group, with many layers of responsibility and the need to connect and communicate with a wide range of groups and individuals, OHCG needs to conduct its work through the efforts of two to three paid staff as well as committee members (Table 1). This has made the group vulnerable to changing government agendas. In the years since they were first encouraged by the government to form on a catchment basis, and provided with administrative support, they have lost all core funding. OHCG survives financially through undertaking specific projects, effectively becoming the fee for service contractor for government identified by Hajkowicz in 2009.

The Commonwealth government has increasingly tied funding to specific rare and endangered species programs, rather than broader environmental efforts, and delivered funding to the OHCG’s area through a regional NRM organisation whose remit spans over 9.6 million hectares of land and sea (South Coast NRM 2021). Reliance on this funding has diminished greatly in recent years, as it was costing OHCG to act as a contractor. This contrasts with earlier periods, such as 2007–2013, where funding was more readily available for OHCG priorities, including terrestrial biodiversity protection and restoration. In 2008 the group won the National Landcare Community Group Award – a very high level of recognition for their work – and developed ambitious plans to restore ecological connectivity between the two major national parks in the catchment, attracting some corporate sponsorship for that work. However, as available funding, particularly core funding, became more restricted OHCG has had to limit its ambition, and even consider how they could continue to operate. In recent years the state government has allocated significant funding for work that specifically protects and improves the

health of water flowing to the estuary, and this now forms the bulk of the work undertaken by OHCG, enabling them to employ project officers for those specific tasks.

### **Indigenous rangers: Ngadju Conservation**

Since the mid-1990s there has been a significant increase in the resources and institutional opportunities available to traditional owners across Australia to manage their lands, mirroring an international trend (Hill et al. 2013; Ross et al. 2009). A new conservation designation, the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), was officially recognised in 1997 and by 2020 there were 78 IPAs spanning some 74 million hectares (National Indigenous Australians Agency 2020). Ross et al. (2009) noted that while IPAs originated with land rights legislation and the resulting purchase of freehold lands, they now exist across different land tenures and legal arrangements. Increasing recognition of traditional knowledges, the increased independence of many First Nations communities and support in the broader community for traditional land management has led to greater opportunities for First Nations people to participate in conservation of their own country.

One example of this overall change is the return of land management responsibilities to the Ngadju people. Ngadju lands cover much of what is now known as the Great Western Woodlands, recognised as the largest intact temperate woodland on earth. This recognition is relatively recent (Vlachos and Gaynor 2021), and came largely as the result of work by conservation organisations based outside of the area, but with Ngadju Elders and emerging leaders involved in the planning and key events. During the same period, Ngadju were fighting in the courts for their Native Title rights, and in 2014 they achieved recognition of Exclusive Native Title over some 4.4 million hectares of the Woodlands area, and lesser rights over a large area of pastoral leases. While this represented significant land management rights, and responsibilities, there was little government support available, initially at least, for managing that land.

In anticipation of the win in the courts, Ngadju had been meeting regularly with key conservation interests involved in the area. At a two-day meeting in January 2013 members of the Ngadju community stated quite clearly their desire to manage their own lands their way. Funds were raised to enable this to begin, largely drawn from Pew Charitable Trusts, a privately funded conservation organisation, and the Rangelands NRM – which covers some 85 per cent of Western Australia and at that stage was focused on working through local groups. Fundraising, administration and overall program management was undertaken by the Gondwana Link organisation, though the establishment of an initial ranger team and a Dundas Rural Fire Brigade came entirely from the Ngadju community. A Conservation Action Plan was developed by Ngadju for their lands, with support from an outside facilitator and involving key scientific experts with whom Ngadju had developed relationships. As Les Schultz, a driver of the Ngadju Ranger program, put it:

Ngadju is playing catch up, with our people being trained in all aspects of natural resource management and becoming the scientists. This will be a major step toward a holistic recovery—spiritually, physically, economically, geographically, and ecologically. Ngadju want our land manager jobs back from when the first whitefulla visited our shores. (quoted in Bradby, Keesing, and Wardell-Johnson 2016)

The steady growth of Ngadju capacity was managed by Gondwana Link for over four years. During this time vehicles and equipment were secured, rangers gained experience, and a ranger base was established in Norseman – the central, and indeed only, town in the area. A legal entity, Ngadju Conservation Aboriginal Corporation (NCAC) was established in 2017 and this proved pivotal for Ngadju as they established their political credentials.

By September 2017, NCAC was ready to manage the program independently. Gondwana Link handed over administrative and management responsibility, along with the assets, to NCAC, though they continued to provide some additional resources and advice when asked. At much the same time Gondwana Link, working with NCAC, secured a three-year funding commitment from the Commonwealth Government, and nominations were prepared to establish an Indigenous Protected Area over their Exclusive Native Title lands, which was formally declared on 20 March 2021 (Figure 1). This gives NCAC even greater security of funding for the costs of managing their land.

Ngadju are the only on-ground land managers for an area almost as large as Tasmania, and the ranger base is a prominent centre of activity in Norseman. Rangers come and go on their various tasks – monitoring wildlife, protecting and cleaning out *wunyarrr* (water trees), removing weeds, repairing damage and managing visitors at key sites, running camps that transfer knowledge from old to young, and attending the many meetings needed for Ngadju to assert their role as land managers with the government agencies that also have responsibilities across the area.

Ngadju Conservation is now funded by the Commonwealth both as part of a broader Indigenous Advancement Strategy and for the environmental values of the land they manage (Snow 2020). However, the benefits of Indigenous CLLM extend well beyond the environmental, with ongoing research showing the benefits to the function and health of many communities of undertaking land management work (Hill et al. 2013; Moore, Townsend, and Oldroyd 2006; Schultz et al. 2018).

### **Preserving urban bushland remnants: Friends of Inglewood Triangle**

The origin of CLLM in metropolitan Western Australian has multiple strands. The first can be found in naturalist and wildflower appreciation groups dating from the colonial period. Another is via ‘Friends of’ groups dating from the 1980s as knowledge about conservation issues on the Swan Coastal Plain became widespread, including through the System 6 Report (Environmental Protection Authority 1983). Concurrently, development pressures led to an increased number of localised environmental disputes across Perth. The Urban Bushland Council was formed in 1993 as an umbrella organisation to assist local groups in advocacy, and now has more than 80 member groups (Urban Bushland Council 2022). In 2000 the WA Government introduced the Bush Forever strategic plan, that aimed to preserve 287 bush sites representing 10 per cent of original vegetation complexes on the Swan Coastal Plain. (Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories 1996) The Urban Bushland Council represents many groups associated with continuing campaigns to preserve these sites. While originating in advocacy, the activities of metropolitan ‘Friends’ groups now involve hands-on work to weed and revegetate their bush remnants.

The Friends of Inglewood Triangle is a typical example (Figure 1). The group originated to advocate for a 1.8 ha remnant of bushland in suburban Perth that had survived as a corner of a golf course lease until road realignments cut off a 'triangle' of undeveloped land in 1960 (Friends of Inglewood Triangle 2021). Incursions from rubbish dumping and weed infestation threatened its survival until, in the 1990s, a group of local ratepayers lobbied to have this land classified as an A class reserve. While too small for a Bush Forever site, it is a good remnant of the Banksia Woodlands of the Swan Coastal Plain, a Threatened Ecological Community classified as endangered. The Friends of Inglewood Triangle formed in 2007 to look after it. With support from the Local Government Authority (LGA), the area was fenced and pedestrian gates installed. Over the years the Friends have played a significant role in the management of this site, their efforts rewarded by regrowth of many native species. The group currently has around 30 members, nearly all of whom live within a kilometre of the Triangle. Weekly activities include rubbish collection and weeding while annual activities include revegetation of bare areas using seedlings provided by the LGA. During summer, the Friends take turns to water from a tank provided by the LGA until plants are established. The work is co-ordinated by a small committee who liaise with the LGA when needed, but otherwise work independently. Whilst initially entirely dependent on the LGA for materials, since 2012 the Friends have applied for grants to progress their own priorities, including interpretive signage, targeted dieback treatment, contract weeding and guided walks to foster community engagement. Annual funding for the last three years has varied from \$15–20,000. Like many small groups the Friends are not incorporated and require a sponsor, such as the Urban Bushland Council, to receive funding from external providers.

The Friends of Inglewood Triangle members come from the local community that lives around the area being cared for. Together they form a sub community of people interested in bush conservation and, through membership of the Urban Bushland Council, are linked to similarly interested people and other Friends groups across the metropolitan area. The majority of the Friends lack specialist knowledge, but have acquired a deep understanding of the place through years of observation and hands-on experimentation. The Friends host visits from a local kindergarten, bushwalking groups and members of parliament and have forged a connection with the adjacent golf course around care for bush pockets. They have a social media site and have developed downloadable resources such as field guides for local plants, animals, fungi and weeds (Friends of Inglewood Triangle 2021).

The Friends might only gather as the whole group a couple of times a year, such as an annual meeting or Clean Up Australia Day. Often members work on different days of the week and communicate with each other by phone or email. While they elect office bearers each year, it is typical for longer-term members to be sought out for advice on specific issues regardless of their role. Individual members are empowered to take action, such as calling up Friends for an extra watering session after a hot spell. The LGA consults the Friends group on matters that affect the Triangle and sometimes refers other groups to them for advice. The local residence of most of the Friends enables an unofficial surveillance system with members frequently driving, walking or riding past the Triangle whilst carrying out other activities. Therefore rubbish dumping and oil spills around the perimeter of the Triangle are quickly reported to the LGA or road authority.

The work of the Friends preserves and enhances the biodiversity of this small bush remnant from an intuitive and experiential locus derived from hands-on work. This self-directed community enacts their stewardship through repeated hands-on activities and experiences across time in this specific place, rendering organisations and resources external to their shared vision of land management. Unlike the larger CLLM groups, the Friends are able to carry out this stewardship without external funding. However, obtaining small competitive grants serves both to increase their ability to pursue their shared vision and to present as a credible management partner to the LGA.

## Conclusion

Despite their large differences in area under management, history and governance and their unique challenges in a neoliberal era, the three case study groups fit the concept of CLLM in their *co-operative, ongoing, hands-on work driven by local community interest to maintain and improve a particular geographical area*. Key themes to emerge from these case studies include the role of government in fostering, and sometimes undermining, CLLM as a social movement; the capacity of community leadership to drive major change programs and the impact of neoliberal structural changes such as public funding increasingly being delivered to procure services. While some of these issues have been identified by earlier historical work on the landcare movement, broadening the scope to include other forms of CLLM stands to yield new insights at a crucial time for the movement.

A focus on the novel category of CLLM, using our three examples, suggests ways in which the various kind of CLLM group can learn from each other. For example, patterns of change over three decades of OHCG's operation, do indeed reflect the phases identified by Hajkowicz (2009). However, where Hajkowicz emphasises research casting doubt on the effectiveness of the federal government's Landcare program in its community-led phase, our three examples indicate that such groups have great potential to ameliorate degradation and effect significant improvement in biodiversity and land and water quality within their ambit. CLLM, while not necessarily fitting government definitions of 'strategic' investment, can nevertheless effect landscape-level change when magnified by widespread local actions. But these tasks take time and a consistency of approach. Though initial efforts are often forged in a partnership approach with government, to achieve mutually agreed goals, the groups demonstrate a long-term consistency and application which governments seem unable or unwilling to match.

It seems that in the pursuit of the ideal neoliberal frameworks for achieving outcomes measurable in the short term with maximum economic efficiency, community efforts can be – and have been – left stranded with their full potential unrealised. In the case of the Ngadju Rangers, while a deep connection to country has driven the progress toward IPA management, resourcing for 4.4 million hectares is inadequate. Catchment-scale groups like OHCG are similarly dependent on external funding to maintain operations over a substantial area within a diverse social and physical environment, making them vulnerable to changes in funding availability and additional obligations. Groups with a narrower geographical focus, like the Friends of Inglewood Triangle, may be able to retain greater autonomy – and thus community leadership – due to lesser resource

requirements, if they are able to maintain good working relationships with local government and local enterprise.

Underlying the changing structures of land management groups at different scales, and through different modes of operation and funding, are unifying factors in their longevity and commitment. They share the attributes of collaborative, hands-on work for a specific area, whose value is defined by the community of carers. Thus environmental management policy should aim to amplify work done by communities who lead land management through their repeated labour, adaptation to change and local knowledge. While scale has been seen to limit the extent of hands-on activities in a neoliberal funding environment, it has also obscured the commonality between community-led groups. A wider historical perspective can restore this understanding, reveal the effectiveness of CLLM and show how the movement and government programs can most effectively interact. Local knowledge, strong attachment to place and willingness to take action are important resources in a time of accelerated anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss. Informed, committed and well-supported communities continuing to lead land management is the best future prospect.

## Notes

1. 'Minutes of Proceedings at a Meeting to discuss the possible formation of a Kalgan River Catchment Area Committee held in the reception room, Shire of Albany, on Friday 14th September 1990', Oyster Harbour Catchment Group Archive.
2. 'Minutes of Proceedings at the Inaugural meeting of the Kalgan/Kin River Catchment Area Committee held in the Council Chambers, Shire of Albany, Mercer Road, Albany on Friday 12th October, 1990', Oyster Harbour Catchment Group Archive.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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