Considerations for large-scale biodiversity reforestation plantings. Part 6: landholder and community engagement

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Introduction
This article is the sixth in a series discussing considerations needed in large-scale tree planting for biodiversity outcomes. We focus on the key areas of communication that have proven effective to inform the community, landholders and other stakeholders assisting to build partnerships and support for such projects. We suggest improvements for the future design and management of projects that involve people using these reforested sites and that integrate community involvement over time.

Communication strategy
It is vitally important to have an effective and simple communication strategy for each project. Communication about various aspects of the project will need to occur both within the organisation and with other organisations (e.g. state, local and federal departments), adjoining landholders and the wider community to ensure the project is undertaken within time lines and within budget. Therefore, significant players will need to be identified very early so that they are kept informed of progress and have an opportunity to give feedback or voice concerns.

Although most large-scale plantings or forest restorations need to be undertaken on an industrial scale, it is important to have a landholder and community engagement strategy to ensure local and community-wide concerns are taken into account and that correct information is being transferred.

Landholders
Landholders adjoining proposed planting sites should be consulted and the plans discussed openly with a view to modification, if required, for such aspects as fire risk. Consulting should start very early in the process to ensure that any issues can be discussed and hopefully resolved within the project time lines. There may be specific requests from landholders that can be incorporated with minimal project impact such as enhanced set-backs, fire breaks and site stratification (e.g. understorey corridors that omit canopy trees to minimise branch drop or to ensure views are retained).

Personal representation is often a very useful method to gain the landholders’ trust and for them to see the draft plans first-hand. Several meetings may be required before the plans are agreed to. But once agreed, they should be implemented without any negative input from the landholders provided they are regularly kept informed of progress and completion dates.

Adaptive management even in the planning phase can mitigate costs and potential hostility for all involved before any implementation works are undertaken. Land being excluded from the project post-planning can be a consequence of poor engagement and will have impacts on the proponent and contractors in regards to relationships and budgets.

Community engagement
There are a number of strategies that can be applied to gain the support of the wider community and keep them informed such as:

- Websites (where access is available).
- Community planting days.
- Newsletters or e-newsletters.
- Joint activities with community organisations (e.g. Rotary).

Author Greg Siepen demonstrating tree planting to a school child. Photo: Dan Cole
Website

Designing a website that is attractive, interactive and simple can assist greatly in information transfer and communication. The website can provide a range of functions such as highlighting community planting days and providing a means of registering for them (for insurance purposes); an avenue for public feedback; show highlights of the bigger planting program; and address issues of concern.

Community planting days

Reforestation in public areas can benefit through community planting days. If planned well and the public relations programs reach far and wide, a large number of people will attend these activities. For example, one could hold a community planting activity in a public park in association with local government regular ‘Environmental Days’. The attending public may enjoy the range of activities available provided by Council as well as learn something about a large-scale tree planting project and how to plant seedlings successfully. All these activities build bridges between the organisations involved, the community and other stakeholders.

Newsletters

Newsletters, whether hardcopy or via email, are very useful to provide information to keep the public abreast of what is going on with a large-scale tree planting project. They can provide a number of functions including providing for surveys of the general public, distributing information and achievements of the project, and providing avenues for feedback.

Joint Activities

Holding joint activities with well-recognised organisations such as Rotary will assist in building bridges with various groups in the wider community. It also allows the community to be put in touch with successful organisations which can benefit the community via support for individuals and projects.

Future engagement and planning considerations

Integrating social and cultural values into large-scale reforestation

Beyond the ecological benefits that reforestation can provide such as habitat, erosion protection, improved soil fertility, carbon sequestration, corridors and connectivity, large-scale tree projects can offer further social and cultural benefits. For instance, in highly urbanised areas communities are now seeking increased opportunities for public spaces that afford a sense of nature along with amenity and recreational values. Well-designed biodiverse forests can provide these values and meaning to the community without the long-term maintenance requirements of traditional parks.

Instead of implementing standard reforestation methodologies primarily focused on site capture and habitat objectives, the planning and management can also include the social-ecological exchange so that biodiverse forests are established to be permeable places and a recreation destination.

An example from south-east Queensland is a biodiverse forest integrating an environmental arboretum at the Griffith University, Logan Campus undertaken in 2014. This particular project was developed as a partnership between Logan City Council, Griffith University and The Water and Carbon Group as part of the Slacks Creek Restoration Project which is funded by the Federal Government.

The arboretum focus is a regional and cultural collection of key tree species that have Indigenous and European significance underpinned by the Queensland Government Regional Ecosystem Framework. For instance, tree species that were logged for settlement, including rainforest cabinet timber trees, have been included. The arboretum also includes rare and threatened species endemic to south-east Queensland giving it a valuable role in ex-situ conservation as part of the living collection. The project has already remediated the degraded site and activated the open space, while providing an asset for the university and the community that will have ecological, educational, research, amenity and passive recreational benefits. The project has only been realised through strong partnerships and effective communication particularly in the planning phase.

As part of the planning framework in future projects landholders, communities and traditional owners should be consulted to understand broader views and potential visions for particular sites. This would often provide more information on local history and identify any concerns that need to be addressed. This could become an effective layer in the planning phase to drive...

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