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Landcare and ecological modernization in Australia: promoting ecological awareness or economic development?

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Abstract

In this paper the nature and origins of Australian Landcare are described in the context of the weak form of ecological modernization adhered to by the current neo-conservative Australian Government. After outlining Foucault's concept of discourse, the way in which landcare discourse and practice reflect the dominant neo-liberal rationale is examined, highlighting contradictions between its environmental rhetoric and economic imperative. The paper concludes with a discussion of potential discursive sources for an alternate and more truly transformative rural environmentalism than that currently apparent within Landcare discourse.

Introduction

The current Federal Government in Australia has very poor environmental credentials. It is known internationally for its anti-environmental stance and refusal to sign the Kyoto Greenhouse Agreement. Yet this is inconsistent with its position as a wealthy nation where widespread public concerns for environmental issues are sustained by a vigorous and critical environmental debate among green activists, environmental researchers and academics. Australia has enacted environmental legislation, set up bodies and agencies to monitor the state of the environment and to address specific issues. Examples include the Greenhouse Office and Land and Water, Australia. While about one per cent of the national budget is devoted to pressing ecological issues, timber and fossil fuel industries receive "many times that in direct and indirect subsidies" (Christoff et al, 2001:99).

Landcare which is the focus of this discussion is a nation-wide program funded by government. The program not only has the potential to increase awareness of environmental problems at local level, but also to change farming practices and everyday relations with nature. Though these aims are central to current government rhetoric, policies prioritizing economic growth, competition and free markets reflect continuance of neo-conservative ideologies of the 1980s which undermine Landcare's operation.

Landcare was introduced by a more environmentally concerned Labor government and retained by the conservatives who came to power in 1996. In the late 1990s, the conservative government embraced a weak form of ecological modernization. Christoff distinguishes between 'weak' and 'strong' forms of ecological modernization. In the weak form, typified in the Australian approach, emphasis is on "technological innovation" and the "(re)incorporatation of environmental 'externalities' into the costs of production (Christoff, 2000:217). In this technological and market driven approach to envi-

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ronmental sustainability, "…The environment is reduced to a series of concerns about resource inputs, waste and pollutant emissions. As cultural needs and 'non-anthropocentric' values …. cannot be reduced to monetary terms, they tend to be marginalized or excluded from consideration. (Christoff, 2000:217) Stronger forms of ecological modernization incorporate ecological values and aim for integration of ecological concerns into the economy to the point where reflexive understanding of ecological change shapes the path of development (Young, 2000). Although economically sustainable development (ESD) is the principle underpinning Australia's major environmental legislation passed in 1999, economic growth in Australia follows the old paths of industrial modernization rather than ecological modernization. The government eschews regulatory controls, strongly advocating market mechanisms and voluntary agreements (Papadakis & Grant, 2003) which companies have been slow to adopt in any thoroughgoing way. There is no effective national environmental strategy and a conspicuous lack of cooperation between Federal and State governments on important environmental issues.[1]

The government's environmental agenda and its regional development initiatives have been strongly criticized for being politically rather than environmentally strategic (Thomson, 2002). Andrew Campbell (LAL, 2002:23) argues that spending on Landcare diverts attention from "cost cutting and cost shifting" associated with the restructuring of agriculture and the privatization of rural extension services. Doyle (2000:176-77) echo this view, commenting that funded environmental programs concentrate on rural and agricultural issues, to the detriment of environmental concerns in general. This is consistent with a desire to 'reform' agriculture where ESD is interpreted as an efficiency measure dependent on technological innovations to achieve higher levels of productivity. A less direct form of cost shifting involves the devolution of environmental risk and the costs of repairing degraded land to rural producers. This process of internalizing the previously external costs of the environment is seen most clearly in the establishment of markets in resources such as water. This favours agribusiness as does the general pressure to industrialize agriculture involving investment in large scale plant and equipment. The trend to industrial agriculture tends to perpetuate rather than redress, the worst aspects of conventional broad acre farming in Australia. In its insensitivity to the diversity and fragility of Australian eco-systems, conventional agriculture has become the chief cause of land degradation (Vanclay & Lawrence,1995**;** Flannery, 2003). Emphasis on competition and efficient large-scale production means that many small farmers are encouraged to leave the industry if they cannot enlarge their enterprises or have difficulty competing. This push to industrialize is in many ways inconsistent with much of the rhetoric, if not the practice of Landcare which emphasizes the caring role of farmers as 'stewards of the land'.

Australian Landcare

The popular National Landcare program has been promoted as evidence of the conservative government's concern about green issues. The aims of the program are to increase awareness of land degradation and the value of sustainable land management practices, primarily amongst landholders in rural Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). The scheme was based on a pattern of local environmental action developed

in West Australia and Victoria in the mid 1980s involving community action groups assisted by government funding. The National Landcare program emerged in 1989 as a result of a joint initiative by leaders of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) (Toyne & Farley, 1989). It was seen as a way to establish productive partnerships between local communities and government at all levels – local, State and Federal. Based on the idea of self-help, with local communities identifying problems and initiating projects, the scheme was attractive to grass roots environmental groups as well as community activists of all kinds. The Federal (Labor) Government declared the 1990s the 'Decade of Landcare' and expanded funding sources for Landcare groups. State Governments such as Queensland which had no previous experience of Landcare were drawn into supporting the scheme. The private company, Landcare Australia Limited (LAL) was established to promote Landcare and to obtain funding from the private sector.

Throughout the early 1990s Landcare was seen as an innovative and successful scheme. It was boosted enormously by an injection of funding from the newly elected conservative Federal Government in 1997. The incoming government established the National Heritage Trust (NHT) [2] which was given the task of dispersing money for environmental projects, including the expansion of Landcare. The additional money was made available by the sale of parts of the national telecommunications company, Telstra.[3]

The success of Landcare is described statistically on the Landcare and LAL websites. It claimed that by 2000, LAL had attracted over $16 million in cash, in-kind sponsorship and free media coverage from its 'corporate partners'. High levels of local participation in local landcare groups were revealed with about 40% of primary producers being involved and around 80% of rural residents aware of its activities (ABS, 2003: 4). At the moment there are around 4,000 operating landcare groups (DAFF, 2004). These responses indicate the appeal of Landcare as well as the effectiveness of promotional activities. However, Landcare, and other NHT activities were sharply criticized by groups such as ACF for wasting funds and failing to achieve its own environmental aims because of poor coordination, waste of money and lack of a strategic plan (ACF, 2001).

The most constructive critical comments noted improvement of community conservation skills and awareness and tended to focus on the mechanics of the scheme to improve grassroots democratic procedures (Lockie & Vanclay, 1997). Concerns included predictable issues arising from local politics, class and gender divisions which influenced who participated in the groups as well as the ability of elites to control local environmental agendas (Morrissey and Lawrence, 1997). Formal reviews of the scheme considered the government's concern to obtain measurable outcomes for the money invested. High participation levels were seen as pleasing, but not necessarily indicating increased awareness of degradation issues or greater use of sustainable practices on the part of farmers. Although statistics indicated a trend in this direction, the quantifiable indicators of changing practices were disappointing. Explanations in terms of social and economic factors (low farm incomes and drought) were noted, but the emphasis was on increasing efforts to demonstrate to farmers the "commercial value of sustainable usage" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

New directions at the end of the decade of Landcare

New guidelines for the second round of National Heritage Trust (NHT) funding have been oriented to a "more targeted approach" to "deliver important resource condition outcomes". While still "strongly supportive" of community group activity and claiming that community organizations "will play an important role", there is a new focus on regions and so-called 'regional communities'. Rather than neighbourhoods and small rural districts, local participation is now centred on new regional committees of 'community stakeholders'. These committees bring together representatives of industry and other interest groups within a region. This results in very uneven power relations on some regional committees where very large pastoral and mining companies can dominate. In western Queensland this also means that small producers compete with pastoral corporations for a single voice among representatives from mining corporations, regional tourism, local government and indigenous communities.[4]

Imagery in relation to Landcare incorporates notions of care, stewardship and social ties to place. In contrast, the language describing the new regional arrangements is highly instrumental in an economic, scientific and bureaucratic sense. It focuses on natural 'resource management', investment outcomes, 'stakeholders' and competitive bidding for funds which are allocated by means of stricter criteria. The community values implicit in the landcare rhetoric are absent. State authorities are now included in the funding process; they add another level of bureaucracy alerting landholders to its political nature which was less obvious because previously the NHT tended to disguise the federal ministers' role. The bulk of funding is now allocated to regional resource assessment, regional management plans, strategies and investment projects to achieve a "long term, coordinated approach" (NHT, 2004). While regional and national strategies are necessary if Australia is to develop a comprehensive view of environmental damage, subsuming Landcare under a tightly regulated regional framework reveals a clear shift in emphasis. Of the $1 billion allocated for the current five-year period, $122 million is for Landcare over the three years from 2003 and is tied to a review of the program's effectiveness.[5]

These changes to Landcare tend to support the conclusions of some critical analyses of the scheme by rural sociologists (Lockie, 1997, 2000 & 2001; Martin, 1996 & 1997; Higgins, 2001; Higgins & Lockie, 2002). These writers have utilized Foucaldian discourse analysis to deconstruct the messages of Landcare. Higgins and Lockie argue that the discursive construction of farmer's identity along more calculating and rational lines is consistent with the instrumental approach to farming and the environment which is part of the Federal government's 'reform' of agriculture. Before going on to discuss the discursive construction of farmer identity, Foucault's concept of discourse is briefly outline.

Discourse and discourse analysis

Foucault's (1972) concept of a discursive formation, conceptualizes discourse in the broadest sense, as comprising all statements about an object – the environment in this case. Foucault argues that it is essential to identify the nature and emergence of historically specific "rationales" which are central to discourse and determine the manner in which issues are conceived and problematized. For Foucault, these rationales are the

'rules of discourse', which like the 'rules' of language or culture, once absorbed or dominant within discourse determine the outlook of individuals and underpin policy and institutional approaches. Various bodies of knowledge (such as academic disciplines) represent relatively discrete knowledge systems. Each incorporates its own theoretical paradigm which defines approaches to phenomena and how problems are defined. Yet, despite the importance of theory and ideas, Foucault claims that the rules of discourse or the rationales emerge primarily from social practices. Systems of knowledge and theoretical principles need to be taken into account, but rationales can only be identified by examination of routine practices. Rationales are best exemplified within institutions such as scientific bodies, government agencies, schools and hospitals where taken-or-granted normative orientations and internal criteria of credibility are discernible. The Australian Landcare Movement can be seen as such an institution, but being dispersed over the country, regional differences make it a far less coherent whole than a hospital. There is scope for landcare workers to develop their own routines and methods of operation within very broad guidelines and limitations on what will be funded. In this sense it can be seen that the 'official' discourse of Landcare found in all the promotional material can differ considerably from the routine practice of Landcare on the ground.

As argued by Hajer (1995), Rutherford (1999 a & b) and others following Foucault, discursive formations are characterized by contradiction, sub-discourses and competing constructions of 'reality'. Stability and coherence is lacking and specific (sub) discourses wax and wane in these arenas of unstable power relations. The essentially political nature of discourse is linked to Foucault's conceptualization of knowledge and power, with discursive practices seen as assertions of the 'truth' of rival systems of meaning. His rejection of the possibility of historically continuous and coherent conceptual frameworks leads to emphasize on disjunction, discontinuity and the constant emergence new ways of defining and interpreting issues. Thus rationales or the rules of discourse must be located within changing social, political, economic and cultural contexts and not explored as an exercise in the history of ideas (Foucault, 1972).

Discontinuity points to the emergence of alternative rationales which is central to this discussion of discursive sources of resistance. Environmental discourse can be seen as an arena of competing voices that emerge and merge - from within the green movement, from capitalist corporations and among independent scientists, bureaucrats, politicians, producer and consumer groups. Differences within the plethora of opposing views take a variety of forms. Not only do they represent struggles to impose different rationales, at a more superficial level, they can seen as the activities of interest groups interpreting issues in keeping with their own goals and agendas, while still conceiving the problems in terms of the dominant rationale. Landcare discourse fits the latter category in its narrow technical interpretation of sustainability in keeping with the government's view of ecological modernization.

Though Foucault does not discuss environmental issues, his concept of bio-politics has been used by writers considering the transformation of environmental discourses. Rutherford (1999b) for example writes of "ecological governmentality" where the promise of ecological modernization is founded on "scientific systems ecology". He describes this as an "energy-economic model of the environment" with the essential feature being the flow of energy through ecosystems (Rutherford, 1999b: 53). This marriage of a narrowly scientific and quantifiable systems ecology with economics reflects

the nature of the hegemonic environmental discourse of environment in Australia. The power of this discursive construction of ecological modernization to exert an indirect form of social control is examined in the critiques of Landcare by rural sociologists. Higgins and Lockie (Higgins, 2001; Higgins & Lockie, 2002) describe a normalization process where the personal norms and behaviour of self-regulating subjects are aligned with "socio-political objectives" . [6] Martin, like Higgins and Lockie sees this as constructing a 'calculating farmer' consistent with neo-liberal ideology and economic rationalism which underpins the historically specific strain of Australian ecological discourse of which Landcare discourse is a part.

Martin (1997) also looks at the issue of community participation and empowerment, deconstructing the claim within Landcare discourse that the pre-Landcare 'top down' model of relations between local producers and government has been overturned. He claims that within Landcare's more subtle form of discursive control, power relations remained largely unchanged. Lockie (2001) and Martin (1997) both illustrate ways in which the rhetoric of community participation within Landcare discourse is in itself disempowering. Lockie (2000 & 2001) argues that direct regulation has never been strong with the state relying on an educative and advisory role to influence farming practices. Under Landcare, bureaucratic control is exerted by means of funding priorities while the language of community initiatives and participation depoliticizes issues by distancing the bureaucracy. Martin claims that within Landcare discourse, power is constructed as a thing, to be "'given away', 'shared', and 'redistributed'" (Martin, 1997:46). This implies local participation is bestowed by the state rather understood as a democratic right.

In the last sections this paper, questions are raised about discursive constructions of the calculating farmer in relation to Foucault's argument that power is generally contested and dominant rationales can be challenged and undermined by alternate constructions within the fluid power relations of a discursive domain. While acknowledging the asymmetrical relations between the state and farmers, it is argued here that in the work on normalization little attention has been given to the way in which the discursive strategies of local groups themselves may be empowering in constructions of community or individual identity. A number of discursive sources of resistance are considered; the farming practices of small agriculturalists, agrarian and community ideologies and Landcare rhetoric.

Discursive sources of support and resistance to the construction of the 'calculating farmer'

Agrarian ideologies

Within rural sociology, agrarianism is often discussed in relation to the values and norms important to understandings of self among farmers (Buttel and Flinn, 1975; Craig and Phillips, 1983; Halpin and Martin, 1996). The core belief in agrarian ideologies is respect for farming as an occupation and its value to society as a whole. Other aspects include the importance of family, the autonomy of farmers and property ownership. Different aspects of agrarianism can provide support for the dominant discourse or for alternative constructions of farming and relations to the environment.

Agrarian ideologies take a specific form in Australia and have been shaped by the political economy of agriculture and settler relations with nature in Australia. Australian

agriculture, like its economy was 'born modern', emerging in the era of Nineteenth Century laissez-faire capitalism. It is argued here, that a relatively calculating and unsentimental farmer was part of settler discourse; a farmer 'uncontaminated' by roots within the European peasantry, religious beliefs or American homesteading and Jeffesonian agrarianism (Wunderlich, 2000). Australia's agriculture was commercial and export oriented, with an emphasis on efficiency and the use of modern technology (Raby, 1996). Incorporated into the British trading empire and nurtured by a paternalistic state, its mission was to make a harsh land fruitful – the labour of hardworking settler families would civilize a wild continent. Thus the historical development of farming favoured an instrumental view of land rather than stewardship and in general fits comfortably with dominant discourse and the development of industrial agriculture. If the calculating farmer was already in existence, how is current discourse shaping identity?

Family: The task of civilizing the bush was a family mission which incorporated cultural dimensions at odds with the representations within current dominant discourse which strip small farming to its economic functions. What were once 'family farms' have been reconstructed as 'small businesses'. In keeping with agrarian ideology, family farms were generally characterized by the merger of domestic and working life, the use of family labour and the unity of family and business goals. Plans for the business were usually shaped to meet the specific needs and capacities of the next generation. However, the policy of rural reconstruction (National Competition Policy and the Rural Adjustment Program) have directed farmers to operate solely on business principles and not to confuse family and business. This emphasis has been reinforced by directing funding in rural restructuring programs for training in business management, computing and accounting. Landcare's website provides a wide range of self-help packages for the development of similar skills.

Women: This aspect of the normalization strategy has targeted rural women who are attracted to the possibility of improving or gaining skills and qualifications which would enable them to assume a recognized and central role in farm management. It appeals to rural women's groups as a response to rural patriarchy, highlighting and redressing the essential, but previously "invisible' role of women on farms. On the other hand it draws women, the keystone of family values, into a learning process where farms are constructed purely in business terms. This appeal to women enhances the normalizing power of these policy instruments.

Rural decline: However, the 'attack' on the family has wider ramifications in rural society. Local social and religious life based on kinship and longstanding networks of family connections is being eroded as rural restructuring continues. Awareness of these processes that alter local status and power relations has sharpened concern about the social consequences of economic change and encouraged various forms of rural resistance. Constructions of farming and rural life based on agrarian ideologies are central to rural protests around Australia. They centre on ideologies of family and lifestyle. Support for these claims extends beyond the farming sector to include the residents of small towns in decline from lack of population and employment opportunities. The movement accepts that economic development is needed, not primarily to create affluence, but to

enable families to stay together, to create jobs for young people and to maintain rural towns and lifestyles. Reflecting agrarian ideology, it constructs wholesome rural families and country lifestyle in opposition to urban affluence, stress and greed. Such representations are bolstered by the inflow of urban refugees (retirees, professionals and hobby farmers) seeking a rural idyll in the hinterlands of cities.

Agrarian representations of family and idealized constructions of rural life are a challenge to hegemonic constructions. Rural protest movements in Australia may be marginalized as vainly attempting to resist the forces of globalization, but the critique of urban consumerism and the pace life is an important aspect of Australian contemporary culture featuring in a number of popular television programs.

Autonomy and independence of farmers: Bunce (1998:244) discusses the contradiction within agrarian ideologies between the emphasis on the independence of farming families and the interests of community or society. The contradiction has been more fully exposed in debates on the degradation of the Australian environment by agriculture. The balance between self-interest and the contribution of farming to society central to Australian agrarian ideology has also been disturbed. A strong emphasis on the ancient notion of the dependence of the economy on agriculture has long been supported by the importance of agriculture in Australia as an export-income earner. Though no longer true to the same degree, it is still used by fiercely independent farmers to justify their calls for subsidies and other forms of support, as is the claim that 'the country feeds the city'.

Nevertheless individualism, central to constructions of independent farmers fits the contemporary construction of them as independent business operators competing for market share. This has environmental implications. Devoting time and resources to repair degraded land is more likely to be undertaken than action to protect biodiversity. The long-running debate over the clearing of native vegetation in Queensland illustrates the situation. A number of the new regional agreements include targets to increase areas of native vegetation to protect biodiversity (Amour et al, 2004). Nevertheless, farmers in Queensland have been clearing their land at record rates over the last few years, rejecting arguments about future salinity problems, habitat preservation and global warming. They are driven by the desire to plant pasture grasses and expand grazing capacity, but also in dry years to use the foliage as drought feed for stock. The accelerated rate of clearing was undertaken in anticipation of the introduction of legislation prohibiting the practice. When passed by the Queensland Government in May 2004, it was acclaimed by environmentalists, but created outrage among farmers who argue vehemently, in keeping with neo-liberal belief in the absolute rights of property owners, that they have the right to do what they want on their land. "My land! My trees! My business!" (Reeve, 2001:257)

There is a widespread assumption within Landcare that farmers should be compensated for conservation expenditure that does not directly contribute to productivity and profitability. Landcare strategies for acknowledging property rights and the primacy of farmers' short term economic aims include the principle that the beneficiary pays. Also the corollary, when compensation is paid for taking land out of production (riverbanks for example) or for not clearing trees, is adhered to in some areas. On the other hand, within Landcare successful forms of cooperation which have left the 'slumbering

dragon of property rights' undisturbed, have been achieved in the context of integrated catchment management. Reeve (2001) describes an example of how landholders within a central Victorian catchment acknowledged the need for community action to deal with local land degradation problem. They managed to agree on a joint approach and combined to solve the problem without the issues of individual property rights or compensation arising.

The definition of sustainable development within Landcare

The contradiction between sustainable land use and development is confronted by farmers and graziers daily as they choose between competing regimes of agricultural production and calculate the risks involved. Organic farming based on ecological values is a very small proportion of Australian agriculture. It is not advocated by government agricultural agencies and is marginalized within Landcare discourse. The dominant discourse of sustainability is 'conservation farming', which is promoted as "environmentally sound, economically responsible and professional" (Lockie, 1997:39). Conservation farming is based on the scientific paradigm of industrial agriculture. Lockie (1997: 2001) describes it as 'high input' farming where high levels of productivity are seen to be sustainable when balanced by high levels of synthetic inputs. This reflects the narrow biophysical model of energy flows in 'scientific systems ecology' noted earlier as the foundation of ecological modernization.

However farmers are often suspicious of heavy chemical use and concerned by the costs involved. This reluctance stems not from ignorance or unconcern, but from the need to be convinced of the value of the technologies. Lockie (1997) and Vanclay and Lawrence (1995) claim that farmers are knowledgeable about their farmland and want it to be 'healthy'. They are however dependent on scientific advice which Landcare and the new regional organizations help to supply. Professional consultants and agri-science agencies who provide soil tests and the scientific information on which property management plans are based, are "committed to the high input model of sustainability" (Lockie 2001: 243) and the value of expert knowledge and high tech solutions. Chemical companies earn the right to use the LAL logo and imprimatur of Landcare by donations in kind or cash. There is ambivalence, frustration and resentment among farmers. Their suspicion of government and its agencies is strong and extends to advice on farming practices. A recent requirement, making lease renewals in Queensland contingent on the development of property resource management plans is very contentious. Landcare facilitators need to distance themselves from government to avoid being seen as replacing agricultural extension officers and implementing government policy.

Anti green sentiments and farmers' new found voice in environmental discourse.

Despite their own self-image, farmers have not been depicted as good stewards of the land within Australian environmental discourse. Instead, among more radical environmental groups farmers have been blamed for wanton environmental damage. The green movement in Australia has attracted most publicity for its forest campaigns where media imagery of young 'feral greenies' living in trees, defying angry 'redneck' timber-workers threatening them with bulldozers and chainsaws strengthened an urban / rural

division on ecological issues. Middle-class urban intellectuals and radicals were perceived by rural residents as valuing wilderness over rural jobs and the perception of environmentalist as extremists is widespread and repugnant to many farmers and rural residents.[7]

The prevalence of anti-green rural attitudes raises the question of why Landcare has achieved such high levels of participation among farmers. It is partly explained by original promotion of the scheme by the Australian Farmers Federation. Other reasons relate to Landcare's approach – the careful use of language in Landcare discourse with its appeals to community, cooperation and local control, skillful negotiation of the property rights issues and a construction of sustainability that marginalizes the more ecologically radical practices of organic farming. A distinction is drawn been Landcare and 'greenies' with the latter term remaining a term of derision or abuse in many places.[8] Negative perceptions of 'urban' environmental activists also rest upon positive agrarianism construction of rural as opposed to urban life. They are reinforced by broader cultural notions about 'bush life' as isolated and harsh compared to the soft existence of city dwellers. This feeds resentment over the victories of large green NGOs with capital city headquarters who are seen as responsible for limiting logging and for the ban on the clearing of native vegetation in Queensland.

In some areas (especially Victoria where Landcare has a longer history) participation in Landcare has decreased anti-green attitudes. A deeper form of environmentalism has been fostered by participation in Landcare groups where knowledge of ecological issues has been increased, successful catchment groups have developed a greater sense of cooperation and achievement and respect has developed for local ecologists who give down-to-earth advice. Williams (2004) refers to "closet naturalists" among farmers in NSW who responded keenly to Landcare and took a leading role in local activities. He argues that their enthusiasm created a "ripple effect" throughout the district. This indicates that Landcare, even with the framework of ecological modernization has the potential to be educative. It can build on existing attachment to, and knowledge of local land to achieve a deeper ecological understanding necessary for a permanent change to more sustainable farming practice.

Conclusion

The message Landcare sends to farmers is confused and contradictory. Although the language of ecological sensibility and community pervades its discourse, Landcare practices conform to the current governments' weak form of ecological modernization thinly disguising an economic rationalism where ecological, social and cultural considerations are seen as secondary. In this sense, the construction of farmers as rational and calculating participants in the global economy is confirmed by Landcare discourse, but rather than being a new construction, it is a depleted representation of farmers shorn of their prized cultural heritage and family identity. It is clear that the conflicting messages from landcare can, and will be read in different ways, but farmers are already striving to create their own more rounded sense of identity.

Any effective challenge to dominant discourse is likely to emerge from the current dilemma of farmers facing the need to respond to urgent ecological and economic demands which are not easily reconciled. Landcare discourse appeals to farmers because it

incorporates elements of agrarian ideology which in the past had rationalized the contradictions between self-interest and society and unified family and work. Contradictory elements of discourse have been exposed as individuals face difficult decisions in a context of expanding knowledge about environmental degradation and the increasing power of global markets to determine their economic future. New ways need to be found to reconcile these issues in the everyday life of farmers. Notions of community and family continuity have been largely build on ties to place and offer a starting point. They provide a basis in everyday experience for understanding and belief in sustainability and stewardship of local environments. Given that the transformation of local relations and family life resulting from rural restructuring have already become a political issue, and that there is widespread anger and resentment among farmers now involved in new confrontationalist politics, the basis for a challenge to dominant discourse already exists.

Notes

1 For example the Queensland government's long running battle with farmers' organizations to ban the wholesale clearing of native vegetation tended to be hampered rather than assisted by the Federal government ministers.

2 The Natural Heritage Trust is controlled by a Ministerial Board comprising the ministers responsible for environment and agriculture. An advisory committee providing environmental expertise is appointed by the ministers and chaired by a prominent business leader. Ministerial control of the $1 billion fund has been criticized as open to political manipulation.

3 The sale was politically contentious and unpopular in rural areas. The establishment of the NHT which would funnel money into environmental repair projects on individual farms has been interpreted as a cynical means of achieving a political goal rather than concern for the environment. This appears to be borne out as the dispersal process has been criticized by the Auditor General. Nationally, 75% of monies went to government electorates (Thomson, 2002:1).

4 The professional skills and material resources of large corporations make them attractive board members and their high levels of participation vastly increases their influence over regional environmental issues.

5 In the late 1990s greater integration of Landcare efforts was achieved by means of river catchment strategies. The replacement or incorporation of catchment areas into quasi administrative regions in Queensland can actually hamper environmental efforts in some cases. For example, the Lake Eyre Basin includes landholders from three states where governments have developed different approaches and different structures within the new regional framework making cooperation across state borders much more difficult.

6 Normalization is a term used by Foucault (1977) to represent the way in which individuals internalize the rules of acceptable behaviour embedded in discourse. These understandings , include notions of normal and deviant behaviour by means of which people regulate their actions and develop their identity.

7 Established forms of rural political action have been non-confrontational (though much changed now) and involved utilizing personal connections and networks to directly lobby those in positions of power.

[8] This is exemplified by the tendency in some rural areas to blame school teachers from outside the district for misinforming children and 'brainwashing' them in environmental studies classes.

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