

# Community Based Environmental Outcomes: The Shire of Mundaring's Environmental Advisory Committee

Alan Pilgrim

Curtin University of Technology

Robert Atkins

Shire of Mundaring's Environmental Advisory Committee

## Stories from Practice



### Introduction

Historically, the business of local government has centred on the three R's - roads, rates and rubbish. In recent years the role of local government has broadened to include responsibility in the area of environmental management including the protection of remnant vegetation and waterways, revegetation programs, catchment management and a raft of other related activities under the umbrella of Landcare.

The process is driven by a combination of pressure from the local community for environmental protection (sometimes a mask for 'protection of lifestyle') and from State and Commonwealth governments to become more active in managing environmental problems (eg improving water quality in storm water). The response from local government has included the development of vision statements, Environmental Management Strategies and the preparation of State of the Environment Reports (CDHRD 1994). A number of Councils have shown considerable leadership while many disappointingly have made little progress.

One of the key elements in embracing responsibility for the environment is the incorporation of environmental management into the core business activities of the local authority. Linked to that process is the need for ongoing public consultation to empower the local community so that partnerships can be developed in the formulation of environmental policies in areas such as the conservation and management of local bushland reserves (see for example Binning *et al.* 1999, Cripps *et al.* 1999, Thorman 1999).

In late 1993 the Shire of Mundaring established an Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) to provide a formal avenue for community involvement in environmental planning/management. The EAC has had a significant and positive influence on the development of the Shire's Environmental Management Strategy, including subsequent policies and guidelines and direct involvement in an ongoing environmental education program. Rather than just an exercise

in tokenism the level of community involvement has a relatively high level of citizen power (as discussed by Selman 1996). As a model for community participation in decision making and policy formulation the EAC has proved successful, providing a message of environmental hope for partnerships between the community and local government.

This paper examines the evolution of community participation in environmental management in the Shire of Mundaring and describes some of the key environmental and Landcare initiatives. Much has been achieved over the past six years and as one measure of that success the Shire of Mundaring was awarded the 1999 Telstra Local Government State Landcare Award. In addition, a local community group, the Hovea Parkerville Community Conservation Group was equal winner of the State-wide Living Streams Award, sponsored by the Water and Rivers Commission.

### The physical setting

Located on the rural/urban fringe of the Perth Metropolitan Region the Shire of Mundaring includes a mix of small urban villages surrounded by large bushland residential properties and rural holdings. The Shire boundaries extend from the footslopes of the Darling Scarp eastwards across the Darling Plateau to the townsite of Wooroloo. In the western part of the Shire the landscape is dissected by the incised valleys of the lower reaches of the Helena River and Jane Brook while to the east the landscape is typically of lower relief with more gently sloping valley forms. Virtually all of the Mundaring Shire lies within designated or proposed water supply catchments and in itself this has been a major control on the type and level of development that has taken place within the Shire. Partly as a result of this constraint the area has retained a significant amount of remnant vegetation.

### Early days - an environmental contact group

In the mid to late 1980's a range of development proposals met with growing opposition from local community based

environmental groups concerned about impacts such as the loss of remnant bushland. In response to growing community pressure the Shire of Mundaring established an Environmental Contact Group in September, 1989. Formation of the group was initiated by a Councillor who saw the move as politically advantageous. Membership of the group was restricted to a representative from eight selected community groups ranging from well established and well credentialed groups such as the Wildflower Society to small ad hoc pressure groups. It was intended that the group would meet three to four times a year.

The two key functions identified for the group were to prepare a discussion paper for Council on the proposed appointment of an environmental officer and for the group to serve as a focal point for Council to deal with community concerns of an environmental matter. This was seen as a way of removing the need for individual environmental groups to lobby Council on issues and could also be used to filter environmental concerns before they were considered by Council. The Council was 'seen to be actively addressing environmental issues'

### **Formation of an environmental advisory committee**

Although the Environmental Contact Group proved to be of value as a contact point for Councillors and environmental groups it did not sit within the formal committee structure of the Council. As already noted, membership of the group was also restricted to a select number of community organisations. In addition, due to the infrequency of meetings it was difficult for the committee to generate and maintain any real momentum. In order to progress community input into the decision making process Council moved, in late 1993, to initiate an Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC). Formed as an advisory committee to Council under the Local Government Act the committee now had more status and a formal role in the Council's decision making process.

While the direction of the committee's work remained fundamentally the same as that of the Contact Group the EAC operates under a set of Rules and Terms of Reference. Membership of the EAC is open to all residents of the Shire with the committee expanded in number from eight to twelve - comprising ten community members elected by Council, a representative from the Shire's Voluntary Bushfire Brigades and a Councillor representative. Administrative support is provided by the Council. Nominations for membership are called for by advertisement in a local paper and nominees complete an application form detailing interests, expertise and experience in matters relating to the environment. Membership is for twelve months with retiring members eligible to re-nominate.

The EAC's function is defined as fourfold - advising Council on community opinion and attitude on environmental issues within the Shire of Mundaring; working within the community to encourage an environmental ethic; considering and providing recommendations to Council on any matter referred to it by Council; and, subject to Council direction to conduct

functions and activities involving the community to enhance environmental awareness, canvas issues and/or gain community opinion or information it deems necessary. The EAC's role does not include undertaking environmental assessments on development proposals - that is to say the committee does not function as a subsidiary to Council's Planning Committee.

### **Choosing a focus - an environmental management strategy**

Within the first two months of the formation of the EAC the committee decided to focus on long term outcomes that would be of strategic value to the community. The decision was taken to focus on the development of an Environmental Management Strategy (EMS). This was to involve the committee in a comprehensive review of earlier work initiated by the Environmental Contact Group and included a series of workshops over a twelve month period. In 1991 environmental consultants were engaged to complete an assessment of issues and make recommendations for management. The EAC used this report as the basis for preparing the EMS. Throughout this process the committee was ably assisted by an Environmental Officer contracted through the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council (EMRC).

---

*'The committee was able to provide local expertise and knowledge as well as identify a number of significant shortcomings in the research methodology'*

---

The Environmental Management Strategy was endorsed by Council in February, 1996. The strategy identifies sixteen implementation strategies each divided into a series of tasks with a time line for each action. A total of approximately 100 tasks were identified under the EMS. Development of the EMS represented a major undertaking with the level of input from the committee ensuring that the process was 'community driven' rather than 'Council driven'. Development of the strategy spanned two years and during this time the committee undertook a range of other activities some of which pre-empted the final outcome of the EMS. For example the EAC played a key role as an informal steering committee to another consultancy undertaking an assessment of the more than 200 bushland reserves within the Shire. The committee was able to provide local expertise and knowledge as well as identify a number of significant shortcomings in the research methodology. Without the advice provided through the EAC the assessment of bushland reserves within the Shire is likely to have fallen well short of community expectations in not providing a sufficiently rigorous methodology for comparing the relative significance of different areas of bushland.

Progressive implementation of the EMS has already seen a number of significant outcomes. The most important

community - based initiative has been the development of an Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) program across much of the Shires of Swan and Mundaring (Western and Pilgrim, 1999). A three year project, the Swan Mundaring Community Catchment Project will conclude in January 2000. Funded through the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) the project employs a Catchment Landcare Co-ordinator to undertake a range of community based activities including the formation of catchment groups, development of catchment management plans and a variety of environmental education activities.

Rather than play a direct role in the NHT Landcare project the EAC recommended the formation of a Landcare Working Party to co-ordinate the work of catchment groups within the Shire of Mundaring. The EAC has two representatives on the Working Party with the Working Party reporting to Council through the EAC.

Additional funding through NHT for 1998 and 1999 has enabled employment of a part-time project officer to oversee a range of specific catchment based projects involving on-ground work by community groups. Titled the Urban Hills Catchment Activities Project the 1998 NHT grant of \$119,000 was matched by community and local government input to the value of \$168,000. Work was carried out on twenty two sites within the project area and included the planting of some 65,000 seedlings. The 1999 Urban Hills Bushland Corridors Project is a three year NHT funded project involving 15 sub-projects.

One of the key objectives of the Swan Mundaring Community Catchment Project was to investigate the establishment of a Land Conservation District, or similar body for the project area. In early 1999 the Urban Hills Land Conservation District Committee was formed and by September of 1999 the formal gazettal process had been completed for both the committee membership and the Land Conservation District boundaries. In addition to the Swan Mundaring Community Catchment Project area, the newly formed Land Conservation District now includes the lower Helena Catchment. As a result, the Land Conservation District covers a significant part of the Shires of Swan, Kalamunda and Mundaring.

Other outcomes from the Environmental Management Strategy have included the development of environmental codes of practice, guidelines, policies and strategies including the protection of waterways, conservation of roadside vegetation and the development of a *Friends Group Manual (1998)*. Development of these policies have often been at the forefront of environmental policy initiatives in local government in Western Australia.

In June 1998 the Mundaring Shire Council adopted *The Friends Group Manual*. The manual addresses issues of a safe working environment for volunteers; provides a framework and process for Shire support; and seeks to ensure that work undertaken on bushland reserves enhances their conservation and community values. The Manual represents a major step forward in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of both

volunteers and the Shire. As of October 1999, there were 37 registered Friends Groups within the Shire with all but two or three of these groups active.

Another key function of the EAC is to encourage an environmental ethic within the community and raise the level of awareness. The committee has embraced this role through a range of activities funded by the Shire. Most of the activities involve additional voluntary commitments by committee members and include the preparation of a feature page on environmental issues for a local community newspaper. Topics featured in the environmental page have included dieback management, environmental weeds, rehabilitation of waterways and bushland, recycling, composting, waste minimisation, fire, town planning requirements and many more. Other activities involving the EAC include an annual full day environmental education seminar for teachers working in local schools; an environmental art competition for schools within the Shire and the presentation of environmental workshops such as the *Fire and Weed Control Seminar (1997)* for volunteer bush fire brigades.

## Discussion

There is no doubt that the EAC has both shaped and driven the development of the Mundaring Shire Council's environmental program. At times this has placed the Council at the forefront of local government initiatives in environmental planning in Western Australia. The EAC's success story owes much to the excellent professional services provided by the environmental officer contracted by the Shire through the EMRC. In turn the EAC has added value to the work of the environmental officer by providing peer review and by sharing local knowledge and expertise.

The increased level of environmental activity within the Shire has also seen an increase in budget allocation for environmental related activities. Part of that is reflected in the number of staff employed and in the ability to attract funding from outside sources.

In addition to the services of an Environmental Officer contracted through the EMRC, the Shire now employs an ecologist (part-time) to prepare management plans for key bushland reserves and a part-time bushcare co-ordinator to assist the many volunteer Friends Groups working on the rehabilitation of bushland reserves and waterways throughout the Shire. The three year NHT funded Swan Mundaring Community Catchment Project currently employs a Catchment Landcare Officer and a Project Officer. For the period 1997 - 2001 the local region will have benefited from approximately \$450,000 in NHT funding and approximately \$1,000,000 of in-kind support from the local community, in the form of volunteer labour from Friends Groups and Catchment Groups.

The 1993 decision to establish the EAC resulted from the 'greening' of the Mundaring Shire Council in the early 1990's. The ability of the EAC to continue as a proactive voice for the community is dependent on the interplay of four

components. First and foremost membership of the committee must remain enthusiastic, informed and focussed on achieving progressive implementation of the Environmental Management Strategy, in addition to fulfilling the role of 'community environmental watchdog'. To date the EAC has met that challenge with a membership blend of self taught people with years of practical experience and university trained professionals covering disciplines such as environmental science, botany, engineering, soil science and geography. Each year the committee has included new members with a total of twenty-seven local residents serving at least one year on the committee. The current committee includes several inaugural members and two former councillors.

Secondly, the EAC is very much reliant upon the continuing employment of an environmental officer. While the committee does contribute in a voluntary capacity outside of committee meetings, the preparation of environmental reports and the organisation and facilitation of many of the EAC's initiatives are in the main undertaken by the environmental officer.

The third component in the equation are the elected Councillors. Continued employment of an environmental officer and the implementation of many of the environmental initiatives are dependent upon budget allocations requiring Councillors that understand the often quite complex issues and responsibilities relating to environmental management or that are at least sympathetic to community expectations. Communities with a strong commitment to the environment are able to use the ballot box to influence the shade of green of their local Council. This was well illustrated in the early 1990's in the Shire of Mundaring.

Finally, continued success of the EAC involves not just a commitment from Councillors to fund environmental initiatives but equally a commitment from Shire staff to ensure successful implementation of many of the initiatives. Incorporating environmental management into the core business of local government inevitably involves a change in culture within the organisation. For some this is not an easy transition.

Over the period of the past six years the Shire of Mundaring's Environmental Advisory Committee has progressed from debating issues of environmental management to achieving progressive implementation of a comprehensive Environmental Management Strategy for the Shire. To date the EAC has proven to be an effective means of both empowering the local community and providing the Council with an impressive range of relevant expertise that resides in the community at considerable less cost than other options would provide. The model developed by the Shire of Mundaring provides a message of environmental hope that may well be applicable elsewhere in local government. ☺

## References

Binning, C., Young, M. & Cripps, E. 1999, *Beyond Roads, Rates and Rubbish: Opportunities for local government to conserve native vegetation*, National R and D Program

on Rehabilitation, Management and Conservation of Remnant Vegetation, Research Report 1/99, Environment Australia, Canberra.

Brown, V.A. (ed) 1997, *Managing for Local Sustainability - Policy, Problem-Solving, Practice and Place*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Commonwealth Dept of Housing and Regional Development 1994, *Towards Local Sustainable Development: A Toolkit of Strategies - An Integrated Environmental Management Manual*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Cripps, E., Binning, C. & Young M. 1999, *Opportunity Denied: Review of the Legislative Ability of Local Government to Conserve Native Vegetation*, National R and D Program on Rehabilitation, Management and Conservation of Remnant Vegetation, Research Report 2/99, Environment Australia, Canberra.

Selman, P. 1996, *Local Sustainability: Managing and Planning Ecologically Sound Places*, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Shire of Mundaring 1996, *Environmental Management Strategy*, Shire of Mundaring, June, Western Australia.

Shire of Mundaring 1997, *Code of Practice for Roadside Conservation in Road Construction and Road Maintenance*, Shire of Mundaring, Sept, Western Australia.

Shire of Mundaring 1997, *Fire and Weed Control Seminar. Proceedings and Recommendations of Seminar conducted on 28 June*, Western Australia.

Shire of Mundaring 1998, *Friends Group Manual for Volunteers Involved in Bushland Management Activities on Shire Vested Land*, Shire of Mundaring, June, Western Australia.

Shire of Swan 1996, *The 1996 Environmental Report*, Shire of Swan.

Thorman, R. 1999, *Local Government Managing our Native Vegetation: Some Good Examples*, Bushcare Program of the Natural Heritage Trust, Environment Australia, Canberra.

Western, L. & Pilgrim, A.T. 1999, *Learning As We Go: Catchment Management in the Urban Rural Fringe, The Swan Mundaring Community Catchment Project*. Paper presented at the State Conference of The Australian Association of Environmental Education (W.A), 7th - 8th October, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia.