

Paper for 2005 NSW Coastal Conference, Narooma

Paper Title: How well are we managing our coastal volunteer capital?

Melissa Bradbury¹ and Brian Hughes² - NSW Coastcare Team

¹Melissa Bradbury is the Australian Government Coastal and Marine (Coastcare) Facilitator for NSW. ²Brian Hughes is the Regional Coastcare Facilitator for the Far North Coast.

ABSTRACT

The NSW team of Coastcare Facilitators conducted a survey of community-based volunteer groups working along the NSW coast (referred to as “coastal groups”) between May and October 2005. These groups carry out activities ranging from rehabilitation of dune vegetation to conducting marine science research. Information was collated from a total of 90 surveys, representing approximately 45% of the estimated 200 coastal groups in NSW. Analysis of the survey results has revealed the enormous contribution of around 4000 volunteers to achieving on ground outcomes on the NSW coast.

While the data collected did not enable a precise economic valuation of the volunteer contribution we estimate that over \$3.5 million worth of labour is contributed by NSW coastal groups per year. However, less than half of the coastal groups surveyed were receiving any funding and many groups cited funding for materials as a limiting factor in carrying out their activities. Groups cited the number and availability of volunteers as the major limiting factors for their groups, with fitness of members also important. More than half of the groups surveyed felt that they received good or very good support and around 60% of groups responded that morale was good or fantastic.

The current contribution of volunteers to the NSW coastal environment is impressive, but if taken for granted, opportunities to maximise that contribution could be missed and on ground action could diminish as existing volunteers get older. Management agencies must continue to ensure a productive and supportive working relationship with volunteers and this survey has identified many opportunities to enhance and support the work of coastal groups, including

- Maximise the government resources and grant funding available to match the “in-kind” labour contribution of volunteers,
- Formalising the relationship between groups and their local land manager,
- Improving communication between coastal groups and their local CMA,
- Actively assisting groups to recruit more volunteers, and
- Ensuring that insurance costs are covered by the relevant management agency.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the number of coastal groups applying for and receiving funding through the Australian Government’s Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) has dropped dramatically, possibly due to a number of issues. Natural Resource Management (NRM) reform has brought about many changes,

including opportunities for coastal projects funding and the way that Coastcare operates in NSW. Also, there has not been a NSW Dunecare Conference since 2002 (conferences were run every two years before this date) and this has been an important opportunity to maintain the network of coastal groups. In response to this, Coastcare conducted a survey of coastal groups using the networks maintained by local Councils and Community Support Officers (previously known as Landcare Coordinators). The objectives of the survey were to find out how the coastal groups were faring in general and to gauge their interest in participating in future Dunecare Conferences.

RESULTS



- **13 active members**
- **Ages 40–70 yrs**
- **Weekly working bee**
- **Council is land manager**
- **Weed control and planting**
- **Good morale**
- **Receiving just enough support**
- **Coping with safety requirements**
- **Value of labour ~ \$20 000/year**

Figure 1 Profile of the “average” coastal group

The survey revealed that while there is a diverse range of volunteers and groups working on the coast we can also profile an “average” NSW coastal group (see Figure 1). For example, while the age of volunteers ranged from 4 to 90 years, the most common age range for groups was 40 to 70 years. On average, groups had a total of 19 members with 13 active, although some groups estimated that they had up to 200 members in total while others had only 2 that were active. The frequency of group working bees ranged from twice daily to twice a year, and although many groups worked on an opportunistic or “as needs” basis the most common frequency was once a week.

To calculate the labour contribution for each group we used the frequency of working bees and the average number of active members per group. We did not ask each group how long each working bee lasted so we have assumed an average duration of working bees of 3.5 hours. We used a value of \$20/hr for labour and assigned a “safety factor” by assuming half the active members are present at each working bee. Assuming the 90 groups responding to the

survey were a representative sample of the 200 estimated NSW coastal groups we estimate a figure for the annual labour contribution of over \$3.5 million per year. Clearly, there is much room for error with the assumptions made and we recognise the need for an improved method to calculate the annual labour contribution of coastal groups eg. collate actual records of work activities on a group by group basis.

Some groups are involved in activities such as marine research and fauna surveys but most coastal groups surveyed are primarily involved in weed control and regeneration of coastal vegetation. Many coastal volunteer groups work in National Parks, vacant crown land or even private coastal land, but the majority (two-thirds) of the groups we surveyed worked on land managed by the local Council. When asked “Are you receiving enough support?” 54% indicated that they had good or very good support with a further 19% responding that the support they received was “just enough”. Only 41% of groups indicated they were receiving funding assistance for on-ground works. Most groups indicated that the land manager covered or paid for insurance although around 17% advised that the group met their own insurance costs.

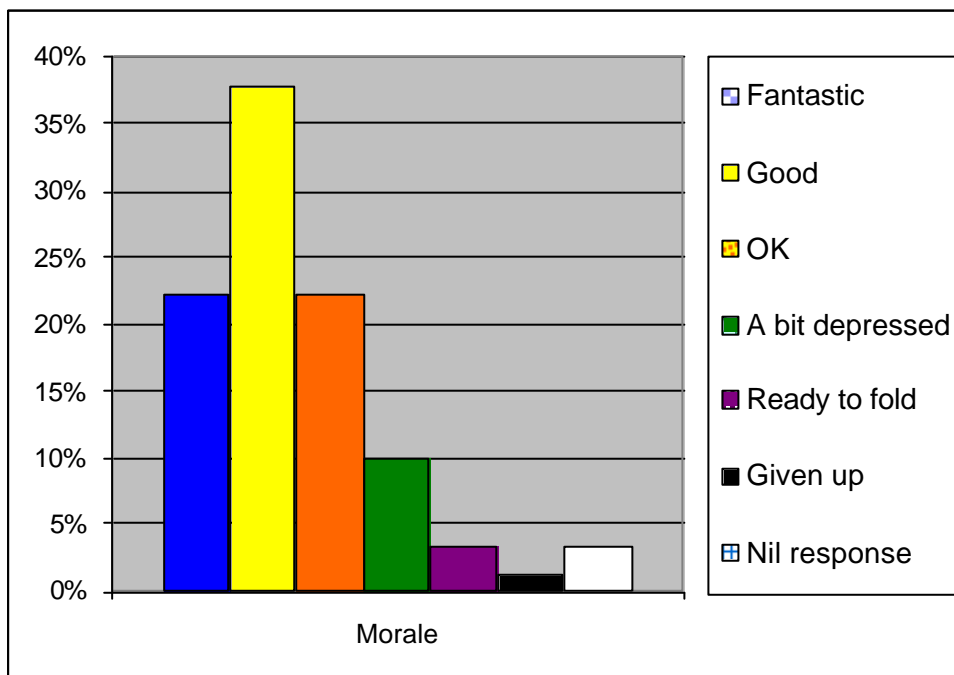


Figure 2. Survey response to question “What is the general mood / morale within your group?”

As shown in Figure 2 many groups have a high morale, with 60% feeling good or fantastic. This result is supported by the response to another question asked in the survey – “What are the major limiting factors for your group?” – with only around 12% of groups indicating that motivation was a limiting factor (Figure 3). Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that the most common limiting factor identified by groups was simply the number of members participating. The availability and fitness of members were also identified as important limiting factors as was funding for materials. Around 12-15% of groups surveyed

identified support and cooperation of the relevant government agency, technical knowledge and insurance as limiting factors.

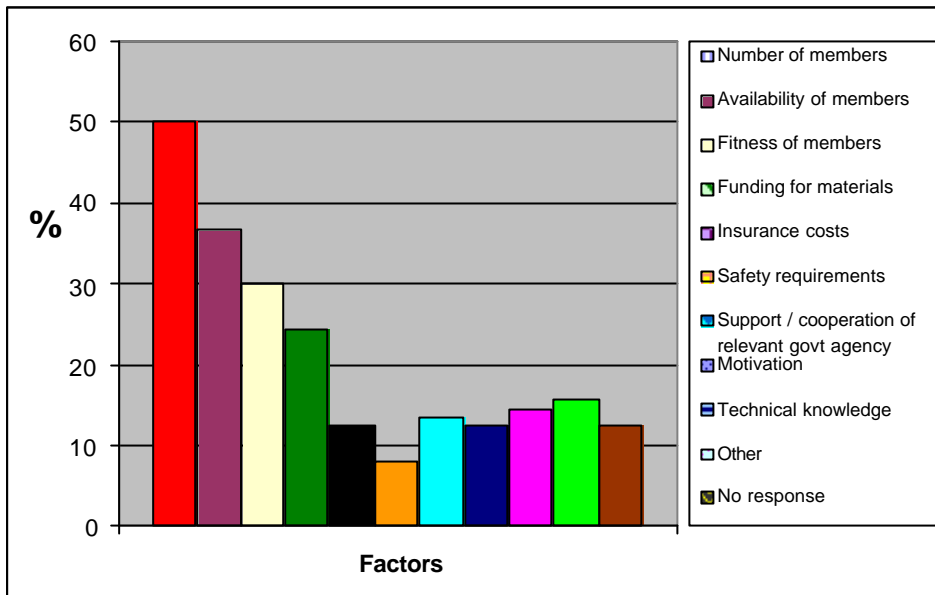


Figure 3 Limiting Factors for Coastal Groups

Only a small proportion of groups identified safety requirements as a limiting factor and this result can be compared with the responses to the question “How has your group managed changing safety requirements?” Only 4% of groups said they were confused with changing safety requirements and 18% said that they hadn’t changed at all. 27% indicated that they had managed changing safety requirements very well and 39% said they were improving or coping.

The survey asked coastal groups about their satisfaction with Envirofund and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) and over 50% of those surveyed gave a blank or nil response. Of the groups who gave a response, around two-thirds were satisfied, very satisfied or extremely satisfied with Envirofund and their CMA. Only 34% indicated that they had no understanding of Natural Resource Management (NRM) reform and 6% gave a blank or nil response. It should be noted that many groups who indicated that they had no contact with their CMA also advised that they were supported by their Landcare Coordinator (Community Support Officer), even though these positions are funded through the CMAs.

DISCUSSION

So ... “How well are we managing our coastal volunteer capital?” Given the results of the survey we feel that in a general sense, NSW coastal land managers are managing their coastal groups adequately and many support their groups extremely well. However, as a reasonable proportion of groups feel unsupported, being left to pay for their own insurance and having insufficient funds for materials there is a need for some land managers to

provide more support. While our estimate of the value of coastal volunteer labour in NSW may be rough, it is clear that volunteers contribute thousands of hours in over 30 coastal Local Government Areas. Ballina Shire Council recently estimated that coastal groups in that shire alone contributed \$167,000 worth of labour during 2004/05 (James Brideson, pers. comm.). To match this contribution, a worthy goal for the future would be that enough support is given to all coastal groups so that each group is limited only by their time and energy.

The absence of funding for over half the groups we surveyed and the large nil response to our question about Envirofund indicates that coastal land managers need to build more partnerships with their groups and encourage them to apply for grants. It also suggests that funding programs such as Envirofund should ensure that application and assessment processes are simple and accessible, enabling coastal groups to receive assistance. The large nil response to our question about CMAs also suggests that an improved relationship between coastal groups and CMAs is needed.

Wright (2004) remarked on the tremendous success of programs such as Dunecare and Coastcare during the last decade and lamented that frustration with recent changes was fast eroding the goodwill built up over the preceding period. Our survey showed that most groups still have a high morale but some other groups have given up or may be on the verge of doing so. As we can't predict what will happen to state and federal programs a good relationship between the coastal land manager and their coastal groups is therefore fundamentally important as they can continue to work together productively, even when funding sources dry up.

The results of our survey also demonstrated that most of our coastal volunteers are aged between 40 and 70 years. Therefore, without ongoing recruitment of volunteers to coastal groups there is a genuine threat to the long-term survival of the coastal volunteer network, even if we maintain goodwill. Much has been made of the population increase in coastal areas and with the number of members being the most limiting factor identified in our survey we believe there is an opportunity to assist coastal groups to recruit more volunteers. Recent marine information and awareness sessions run by Coastcare facilitators in NSW has led to the formation of new marine-oriented groups and we hope to increase the number of volunteers involved in the marine environment in years to come.

Those of us lucky enough to have superannuation or savings are encouraged to look long term with our financial investments in order to build on our existing capital and achieve growth for the future. We believe that our coastal volunteer capital should also be managed with a long term view and we should aim beyond maintaining the current level of community input and attempt to help our volunteer capital grow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All coastal land managers and coastal groups should work towards productive and collaborative working relationships.

Ensure that records of labour are kept and collated for all coastal groups so that the value of the annual labour contribution can be calculated accurately.

Help support the network of coastal groups through regional Dunecare Conferences eg 1-day North Coast Dunecare Conference to be held on 11 December 2005 at Iluka.

Use the existing survey as a baseline; improve the survey methodology and conduct every 2 years to monitor the status of coastal groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NSW Coastcare team: Jo Lane, Jacqui Smith, Charlie Hewitt, Chris Tola, Lachie Whetham and especially Michael Fiedler who helped collate much of the survey data. We would also like to thank all the Community Support Officers and Council staff who assisted in the distribution of the survey. Most of all we would like to thank all the coastal volunteer groups who completed the survey.

References

Brideson, James (personal communication), Ballina Shire Council Natural Resource Extension Officer.

Wright, K. 2004 *Capacity Building In The Environment – Just What Does It Mean?* Proceedings of NSW Coastal Conference 2004.