The four pillars of collaborative rural community environmental research

Potter Rural Community Research Network
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Background: presentation based on

- My own reflections
- Literature review of what works and why
- Collaborative research projects with communities in:
  - Apollo Bay, Victoria
  - Gippsland Victoria
  - Wallatin Creek, W.A.
  - South Australian Arid Lands NRM Board
  - Desert Channels Queensland
- Insights from similar projects
The four pillars

• Locally defined relevance
• Genuine community engagement
• Feedback and reflection
• Adequate timeframes
Locally defined relevance

- Researchers, funding bodies and local communities all have their own needs.
- However, collaborative research tends to work when these align.
  - It seems obvious but it often doesn’t occur in practice.

- This photo is from a scenarios development workshop in Apollo Bay.
  - Residents defined the critical issues for their community.
Genuine community engagement

- Superficial engagement can be disempowering and against the spirit of collaborative research
- Whereas direct involvement with the research process can be empowering for rural communities

- In Gippsland, local residents participated in the design and implementation of a survey.
  - They found it fascinating and empowering to have their efforts formalised as research
Feedback and reflection

• Providing information alone is not a very effective way to learn and change behaviour.
• Adult learning theory shows that, feedback and reflection are important parts of the learning process.

• Providing regular feedback during the research is more useful than just a final results presentation
  • Provides a way to adapt research along the way
Adequate timeframes

• Collaborative community research takes time
  • Particularly to genuinely engage and provide feedback
• Results often take time to become apparent
  • E.g. a collaborative learning for salinity project took 5 years to realise the full benefit.
  • Needed 3 separate funding processes
• In the end it was highly successful
  • But it seemed to get worse before it got better
  • i.e. in the first couple of years the community learned that the problem was bigger than they initially thought
• If the project had finished after 2 years it would have looked like a failure
Adequate timeframes

Constraints on collective capacity

Number of participants

- Finance
- Knowledge
- Labour
- Skills
- Time
- Other

Interviews:
- Interview 1
- Interview 2
- Interview 3
- Interview 4
Discussion

• All 4 pillars are equally important
  • However they don’t receive equal attention
• Three of the pillars about doing good practice research
  • Local relevance
  • Genuine engagement
  • Feedback
• The last pillar i.e. adequate timeframes is about funding limitations
  • This makes it more difficult to do good research practice,
  • E.g. provide feedback
• Locally-based researchers can lead to great projects and address all four areas, but not always
  • Some communities tend to discount local expertise
  • A bit like the ‘Prophet not accepted in own community’
• I’ve usually been treated as a friendly outsider
  • This has made the research easier
  • Licence to ask silly questions which go to the heart of the matter
Conclusion

• So how can rural communities use these four principles?
  • 1. Voice your expectations clearly
    • i.e. demand good practice from researchers
    • Consider how much you want to be engaged
    • Emphasise the need for feedback
  • 2. collaborate with local researchers where possible
    • Can still work with external researchers in same project
  • 3. Be flexible with funding
    • Conventional grants are often very restrictive.
  • 4. Enjoy it.
    • Collaborative research is usually fun when it’s done well.
Further information


