REVEGETATION

LANDHOLDERS AND RECOVERY PLANNING: TOOLIBIN LAKE CATCHMENT

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Why is Toolibin Lake special?

Biodiversity in the wheatbelt has been steadily declining for a number of years, meaning that conservation management now focuses predominantly on remaining areas of biodiversity value. Toolibin Lake is one such area. Located in the Shire of Wickepin, Toolibin is an area of significant interest to government agencies, community groups and private landholders. People are interested in Toolibin Lake because it is the last remaining large freshwater lake in the wheatbelt; however its status as such is threatened by salinity. Efforts to recover Toolibin have been underway for several decades, most recently with CALM using the formal Toolibin Lake recovery plan to try and save the Lake.

The plan has recently been reviewed after a 10-year lifespan, with CALM looking towards recovery of the entire catchment, in addition to Toolibin Lake itself. In light of this CALM wanted up-to-date information from landholders within the catchment about their recovery activities and needs. Such information is critical because most of the catchment is privately owned agricultural land over which CALM has limited jurisdiction. As such, most of the recovery activities, such as fencing of remnants and revegetation, must be undertaken on these lands.

The resultant project, funded by CALM and conducted by Murdoch University, set out to discover (i) how landholders valued Toolibin Lake as well as land management priorities and issues within the catchment, (ii) what landholders felt to be constraints and incentives to adopting recovery management actions and (iii) how landholders felt about CALM's communication, promotion of the Toolibin Lake recovery plan and the strengths and weaknesses of the recovery plan.

What we found

Landholders were sent a mail-out questionnaire and later participated in face-to-face interviews to share their views with us. The results turned up many interesting findings. Landholders valued Toolibin Lake for a number of reasons, and especially for the wildlife habitat and the community value/identity it provides. Interestingly, two-thirds of landholders (68%) operate their property without a farm plan, meaning that only 32% of catchment landholders are using a plan. Earlier reports have estimated that 90% of landholders within this catchment had a farm plan. So what could explain the big difference in actual versus expected use of farm plans? The answer to this possibly lies in what is known as 'Landcare Burnout', with landholders becoming jaded by ongoing demands regarding conservation works: "I think everyone got a bit sick of it, we all got sick to the teeth of doing plans...there's been a lot of criticism on that, farm plans."

In terms of recovery actions landholders are adopting, revegetation is the most common (90% adoption). Two-thirds of landholders (68%) were influenced by CALM subsidies in their decision to adopt recovery actions. A total of 86% of landholders increased the scale of adoption, such as revegetation, in response to subsidies. As a recovery catchment, landholders are being subsidised to undertake revegetation and fencing. A popular future management action, mentioned by 32% of landholders, was deep (sub-surface) drainage, as a means of dealing with salinity.

continued on page 9

continued from page 8

Landholders were asked about constraints to adopting recovery actions on their property. Financial constraints were identified by 77% of respondents, followed by logistical (lack of time) constraints (67%). A 'motivational' constraint (50%) was also apparent, perhaps linked to some degree of Landcare Burnout in the catchment, associated with the long history of conservation work in the area. In terms of incentives, money and information were identified.

When asked about the quality of CALM's communication, all landholders said they felt it was beneficial as it improved the information available and communication throughout the catchment, making landholders more aware of the importance of Toolibin and keeping them informed about developments. However, two-thirds of landholders commented that CALM still needed to improve their liaison within the catchment and that landholders needed to be regularly informed and updated of works and developments.

Similarly, when asked about promotion of the Toolibin Lake recovery plan, landholders said it had raised awareness of the significance of Toolibin, as well as demonstrated CALM efficiency and that they could work effectively to produce tangible results. When asked how they felt the recovery plan could be better promoted, landholders again identified the need for better dissemination of information throughout the catchment. Finally, landholders were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Toolibin Lake recovery plan. Strengths included the recovery plan increasing knowledge (of the situation and recovery efforts), demonstrating government efficiency (by showing that different government agencies could work together productively) and providing funding (in the form of subsidies). Stakeholder interaction (landholders felt that the relationship between themselves and CALM was inadequate), bureaucracy (government reticence to accept deep drainage), fiscal (CALM not receiving enough funding) and lack of catchment involvement (patchy adoption of management actions) were identified as weaknesses.

Summary

These findings have some important implications for the future management of Toolibin catchment and other places with high biodiversity values and significant levels of private ownership. Strong, ongoing communication between government departments and private landholders is essential. Although CALM's communication efforts were complimented, room for improvement was also identified, particularly in keeping landholders up-to-date and consulting with them regarding catchment management. The strong positive influence of subsidies on recovery actions is also an important message. For areas of high biodiversity value, subsidies may be the best way to improve the level and extent of adoption of the desired recovery activities. To get better continuity of management actions for biodiversity across the catchment, multi-farm management agreements provide a novel solution to coordination needs. The last implication from this study is the need to foster and support further development of the Toolibin Catchment Group to progress an integrated approach among landholders to recovery activities.

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