

# Improving understanding of social capital to maximise environmental outcomes in rural communities.

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## Abstract

Southern Incentives is the flagship program of South Coast Natural Resource Management. It is a highly successful community grants program that has assisted landholders, community groups, and other stakeholders to undertake a range of natural resource management activities. Since 2002, the region has benefited through the protection of environmental assets on private and public land. This has been achieved through enhancing community skills, and by fostering land management changes by offering incentive payments for on-ground works.

The most recent program was specifically designed for biodiversity success. Research and planning into the capacity of rural landholders to uptake on-ground works was adequate. The same research and planning was not available on; motivations of rural landholders to implement on-ground works; social capital required to work with this unique group; or social structures of rural communities. Planned works were based on a series of social assumptions and those assumptions were not tested.

This paper examines those assumptions, the impacts of assumptions on the project, and what actions were and were not successful in management of the assumptions. Where adequate consideration of social capital and structures occurred, trust was gained and lasting relationships were developed. This resulted in landholders engaging in more on-ground works and greater environmental outcomes.

## Introduction

South Coast NRM is the leading regional group for natural resource management in the south coast of Western Australia. We work with the community to improve our environment by preserving and protecting unique plants and animals; managing land and waterways; and sharing knowledge and skills in natural resource management.

Southern Incentives is a flagship program of South Coast Natural Resource Management. It is a highly successful community grants program that has assisted landholders, community groups, and other stakeholders to undertake a range of natural resource management activities. Commencing in 2002, this program has benefited the region through the protection of assets and native vegetation of private and public land. This has been achieved through enhancing community skills, and by fostering land management changes.

Southern Incentives has been supported by the Australian and Western Australian governments.

### Southern Incentives: Restoring Gondwana

The project commenced in 2011 and focused on improving landscape connectivity, maximising population viability and reducing threatening processes, building resilience of threatened species and assisting to reduce the impact of climate change. It formed part of a region wide plan to reduce fragmentation by restoring/protecting biodiverse corridors on, and adjacent to, cleared agricultural land. The project area encompassed the regional boundary in the west to the Fitzgerald River and Lake Magenta national parks. Grants targeted farmers who also contributed at least half the value of the grant through in kind and monetary means.

### Social assumptions

Substantial locally relevant biodiversity information exists. Many biodiversity experts provided advice on project design and where efforts could be focused for maximum value for money. Biodiversity outcomes were defined with relative ease and confidence.

The same trusted, local information was not available on social structures in rural communities and some assumptions were made. These assumptions are addressed below.

### Assumption 1: All farmers understand their property

It was assumed farmers had a basic level of understanding of agricultural and ecological processes relevant to their properties. It quickly became evident this was not the case.

Applications identified two groups of farmers, each with different motivating values, knowledge sets, and skills sets.

The first group was small landholders with property sizes of less than 100 ha. Often these farmers were new to farming, educated in other areas, willing to learn, and had off farm income. They often had minimal knowledge of agriculture, where to go for help, what they needed to manage or why.

Generational farmers formed the second group. These farmers were aware of Landcare benefits and had greater understanding of ecological processes. Typically, this group had more knowledge and were less open to change unless it had sound economic reasoning, and are sceptical of outsiders.

### Impact of assumption

Both groups had very different needs.

The needs of small and new farmers required vastly different techniques. It took considerably longer to conduct a site visit. Potential on ground works needed to be explained in detail and there was a hunger for information. Often they were looking for advice on many parts of their farm (outside of the funding options available) as they did not know where to go for this information or even that it was readily available.

Generational farmers had larger properties, often over 3000 ha, and required over an hour travel time. It took time to move over the property and often multiple properties. They also needed more time to assess if our common goals were aligned.

### Management actions

The selection criteria for rating applications had been set up to favour larger projects as they give the most benefit for connectivity throughout the landscape. This needed to be balanced against prioritisation and time to conduct site visits. Relevant local information was made available when visiting smaller properties to give land managers good information, and a start on where to find more.

The size of many generational farmer's properties allowed the time to make personal connections. This gave many farmers confidence in the program and reduced their scepticism once they knew more about the program.

### Assumption 2: Farmers and NRM professionals all use the same language

Most farmers want to have healthy remnant vegetation and want to look after it. It is part of their identity of place, is an indicator of the health of their farm, and often have special memories or emotional attachments to certain spaces or species.

However, they have vastly different driving motivations, cultural factors, language sets and prioritisation systems on how they justify works on their properties. Their businesses and language sets are driven from an economic standing. They do not always have the financial freedom to implement conservation works purely for intrinsic value, even if they recognise this as important. Conservation works can be seen as an emotional rather than a business decision and reasoning for engaging in conservation works will be transformed into a language that fits with their business model, eg 'it will keep the cows out the bush so I don't have to chase through and find them'. The incentive payment enables farmers to justify conservation works from a business perspective and use the value for money in their work plan and budgets. Farmers matched the value of the incentive payment with in kind contributions that was to the same value or greater of the grant.

### Impact of assumption

The differences in language caused some disconnect and confusion between NRM staff and farmers. There was a feeling that farmers "did not want to do the works for the right reasons", that is, they did not say that their primary motivator was not the welfare of potentially threatened and endangered species. This was their primary concern but farmers did not express it in these terms. This led to a feeling that they may be taking advantage of the funding, regardless of the fact they were fencing off sometimes very large portions of land and they were investing considerable amounts of time and money.

### Management action

Recognising the different language and motivations was important in being able to communicate with farmers and give the on-ground works value in the terms that were relevant to them. There was also a need to then translate this language back into one of intrinsic value in the office. Staff were taken out to meet farmers, see the properties and see the works we were funding. Being able to make connections and see the works in context showed staff how the different language sets worked. Staff were able to have a conversation and see for themselves that the intrinsic value of the bush was highly regarded and were able to see how it needed to fit within a whole farm larger context.

The incentives were biodiversity focused but the program was about giving value to people and helping them do things that they could not otherwise justify without the incentive payment.

### Assumption 3: Farmers don't have any social capital needs

Bordeaux defines social capital as "a resource based on trust and shared values, and develops from the weaving-together of people in communities" (Gauntlett, 2011). Rural communities often have a homogenous and conservative set of shared values. Day to day, farmers will work in relative isolation with little outside contact past that of family and any staff. This brings with it safety, lack of judgement, and trust within the community as everyone has had similar [life] education and experiences. 'Outsiders' of the community can be treated with scepticism as they will potentially question their world view.

Relationship development is an integral part of the site visit and it takes time. Conversation is the primary tool in developing a relationship and gaining trust. Once trust and mutual understanding is established, farmers feel safe to be honest about their bush and what it means to them, personally and as part of their business. The time needed to develop relationships was underestimated in the project scoping stage and took much longer than expected.

#### Impact of assumption

The application period for each round was only six weeks. There was considerable pressure to complete all site visits in that time. Reducing site visit time and trying to hurry did not give enough time to develop relationships and trust.

#### Management action

Make the time to get to know your clients and give them time to know you. Often you can be the only other person many generational farmers have seen inside a week. These people work in isolation and your visit can be a big deal.

#### Conclusion

Funding on ground works on private property is key action for landscape scale connectivity. There are many positives to this situation, including the lack of access to the remnant vegetation by the general public, and reducing disturbance to the bush. Some of these stands of remnant vegetation are integral islands in parts of the landscape that have been devastated with diseases like *Phytophthora cinnamomi*.

All works undertaken on private property are only accessible with permission from the landholder/s. Taking the time to develop relationships is time well spent. It helps with the immediate project but it also helps if there is any future monitoring to be done. It was an oversight not to have considered social capital, motivations and needs of farmers in the original project brief because the relationships developed are the centrepiece of the success of the project.

Where adequate consideration of social capital and structures occurred, trust was gained and lasting relationships were developed. This resulted in landholders engaging in more on-ground works and greater environmental outcomes. After a successful project, neighbours would enquire about participating in the program, making some farmers strong advocates of the program. It also saw farmers planning conservation works into their long term business plans, ensuring long term landscape benefits to the region.