

People, passion and place: broadening our ideas about river 'knowledge'

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Introduction

When we think about the term 'knowledge' we tend to think about the range of information presented to us in publications and workshops that outline how particular parts of our environment functions, for example: nitrogen processes in riparian areas; groundwater seepage or in-stream temperature and its importance for river health. The knowledge contained in these publications can be described as 'cognitive', that is, knowledge based on what we define as 'rational' or 'logical'. We assert that people will be able to make informed decisions when they have a sound technical base upon which they can weigh various options and select the one that is appropriate to their needs. Our modern world supports and favours cognitive ways of knowing, and we are more likely to be successful in gaining funding when we can present arguments based on fact rather than feeling.

However, this 'cognitive' approach to knowledge goes against the reality that most people make decisions on emotional rather than rational grounds. James Raffan¹ argues that we should explicitly recognise this and move to thinking about natural resources management and people's experiences of it, through the range of senses (sight, smell, touch, feel, hear) and 'intelligences' (visual, dance, musical, artistic) that we use to interact with our world. He argues that until we do this, we will fail to engage people in natural resources management because cognitive 'knowing' is not personal enough to motivate someone into action. It is only through personal experience that public knowledge becomes meaningful.

Raffan's ideas are borne out by the definition of 'knowledge' that clearly refers to:

'Knowing, familiarity gained by experience (of person, thing or fact)'
Source: Concise Oxford Dictionary

This definition provides a much broader conception of knowledge as being something gained through experience. This enables us to consider the range of experiences that motivate people to behave, think and act the way they do. For example, how someone experiences the natural world can be expressed through paintings, poetry, dance and song. Cultures across the world provide insights into their relationship to their world in writings, ritual and ceremony – all of these are ways of experiencing our natural environment and our place in it. An example of the depth of feeling and connection people have with their natural environment is provided in the following quote from Chief Seattle who was explaining the importance of his people's connection to their rivers to the President of the United States.

The shining water that moves in the streams is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. Each ghostly reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells us of events and memories of the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father. The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes

¹ James Raffan is a writer who is passionate about rivers and our relationship to them. More information can be found at www.writersunion.ca/r/raffan.htm

and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give to any brother... Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely standing in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

These words convey the passion, connection and love Chief Seattle and his people feel about their rivers. In Australia we have writers such as Banjo Patterson, Dorothea McKellar and the painter Clifford Possum to provide us with similar insights into their connection with country. A purely 'cognitive' experience fails to tap into the emotion that drives people to do particular things and, as a result, does not enable a complete understanding about how that person relates to their environment. Without that understanding it is often difficult to gain trust and acceptance from those you might wish to work with to improve natural resources management outcomes.

So where does this leave us? Given that we know emotion is what largely governs decision making it means that to maximize beneficial natural resources management outcomes we need to include the range of experiences people have in the work that we do. By using a framework called the 'Five P's' it is possible to incorporate the many different factors and experiences that impact upon a person working in natural resources management. The Five P's stand for: Profit, Proof, People, Place and Promise and were developed to highlight the full range of factors that impact on natural resources management decision making. It is a framework that can be applied at a number of different levels by people working in catchment management and with rural industries. An overview of each of the Five P's is provided below with an example provided to show how the framework can be applied to a program of research, in this case, the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-Program.

Profit

When we use the term profit, it tends to be given a very narrow interpretation that, in general, relates to how much money is being made from a particular activity. When you go to the dictionary, however, it is defined as 'advantage', 'benefit' or 'gain', a much broader way of thinking about the term. When working with woolgrowers it is clear that although economics is an important motivator for action, it is often a desire to be able to leave their property in better condition than when they took it over, or to restore a part of the creek that is special as a place for the family to gather, that is motivating their desire to do something. Profit in this sense, means far more than a commercial transaction or a decision based purely on business principles – it is about the range of benefits that can accrue from a decision, whether they be at an individual, family or community level. In the Land Water & Wool – Rivers & Water Quality Sub-program this broader definition of 'profit' has been used so that the range of benefits, or 'profit', that woolgrowers are aiming to achieve by undertaking improved natural resources management practices is understood and communicated widely.

Proof

High quality, technically rigorous science that is able to be applied is fundamentally important for good natural resources management decision making. Without good science underpinning management recommendations, there can be little confidence for the end-user that the required outcomes will be achieved. Importantly, scientists working on the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program know that their work has to have practical application, so proof when used in this context, is to provide certainty to woolgrowers that the tools, techniques and guidelines that are developed, are done so on the basis of excellent science. Proof becomes important when

it is presented in ways that people can relate to and understand how it can be used in their daily life – when viewed in this way, proof is, therefore, about providing people with the confidence to act.

People

When it comes down to it, managing our natural resources is all about people and how we interact with our environment. However, we don't tend to spend a lot of time on this topic as we are all too busy managing the day-to-day issues that capture our attention. By mixing social scientists with biophysical scientists, the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Program has been fortunate in developing a team of people with different skills, but who work well together and who are committed to getting the best outcome possible for end-users. Considerable effort has been made by those managing the Program to 'look after' the woolgrowers working on demonstration sites, and the general wool community, so that relationships are maintained and recognised as being fundamental to meeting the objectives the Program has set out to achieve. A range of communication techniques has been used to develop networks throughout the research, industry, government and non-government sectors involved in wool and natural resources management. Oral histories have been used to chart the stories of woolgrowing families, photographic exhibitions, workshops, field days and opportunities for people to meet and share experiences have been created over the life of the Program to provide people with the opportunity to express themselves.

Place

When you ask someone what motivates them to change their behavior it generally comes down to a feeling, for example, wanting to leave their 'place' in good condition for future generations, or wanting to preserve the special 'place' where they went fishing with their Dad. Emotion is what drives us to do most things, yet it is often not talked about and few resources are allocated to taking the time to understand the socio-cultural context within which someone is located. Without this understanding it is difficult to develop guidelines, management recommendations or tools that will be used. Trust and confidence take a long time to build, and asking someone to change their behavior overnight is difficult when there may be no immediate benefit to them. The Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program has tried to create a 'place' for people to turn to for advice and assistance by providing excellent tools and materials, and by employing local project coordinators, who will stay on in the community long after the project has finished. Local people have been trained in the use of new techniques so that they can pass those skills on to others in the region. In this way, we have tried to ensure that the 'places' we have been working in can continue to undertake river restoration work with others in their local community, rather than looking to outsiders to do that work for them.

Promise

This final 'P' is the most difficult to describe, yet it is about valuing the relationships between people that generate trust, confidence and a desire to work together. Promises have been made to local woolgrowing communities involved in the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program that we will listen, empathise, work together and leave something behind when we go. We are committed to ensuring we deliver this promise and examples have been given in this paper to demonstrate how we are doing this (oral histories, employing local project coordinators, training local people in new skills etc..). In addition, those managing the Land Water & Wool Program are currently considering how they can continue to maintain the relationships that have been established and ensure that when the Program ends something is offered in its place that will meet end-user needs.

By examining the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program through the Five P framework it is clear that each 'P' is equally important. In natural resources management there is a tendency to focus on the first two (Profit and Proof) with much talk, but few resources allocated to the other three. By considering the Five P's, the experience of the Land Water & Wool – Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program is better understood as being the result of a range of different factors and experiences, and not dominated by one 'P' over another. The five 'P's is an attempt to explicitly recognise the importance of considering the biophysical, economic, social and environmental together, rather than as separate parts of a puzzle. To date, the Land Water & Wool-Rivers and Water Quality Sub-program has found that people relate well to the five 'P's, as the framework demystifies a lot of the jargon used in natural resources management and places the individual at the centre of the issue, rather than on the periphery.

Conclusion:

Ideally, our work in natural resource management needs to be inclusive, celebratory, and able to incorporate the range of experiences, and hence knowledge, people have of their environment. We may need to combine some of the technically based demands we are placing on community groups, with ways to celebrate and encourage involvement at a range of different levels, not just in formal committee structures or meetings. It would also be valuable to start exploring and validating the importance of ideas around different ways of 'knowing' our rivers and land and to try and place an equal value on the range of 'experiential' knowledge we use in our decision making processes.