

### Short biography

Margaret Gooch is a PhD student within the Australian School of Environmental Studies at Griffith University, Kessels Road, Nathan, Brisbane, Q.4111. Her thesis is concerned with the experiences of catchment volunteers and their contributions to natural resource management, and to their local communities. Her research is funded by the CRC Catchment Hydrology. Margaret can be contacted at M.Gooch@griffith.edu.au

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**Volunteering in catchment management groups:  
empowering the volunteer**

**Author** Margaret Gooch

**Address for correspondence**

Australian School of Environmental Studies

Griffith University, Nathan Campus, Q4111

**Email** [M.Gooch@griffith.edu.au](mailto:M.Gooch@griffith.edu.au)

# **Volunteering in catchment management groups: empowering the volunteer**

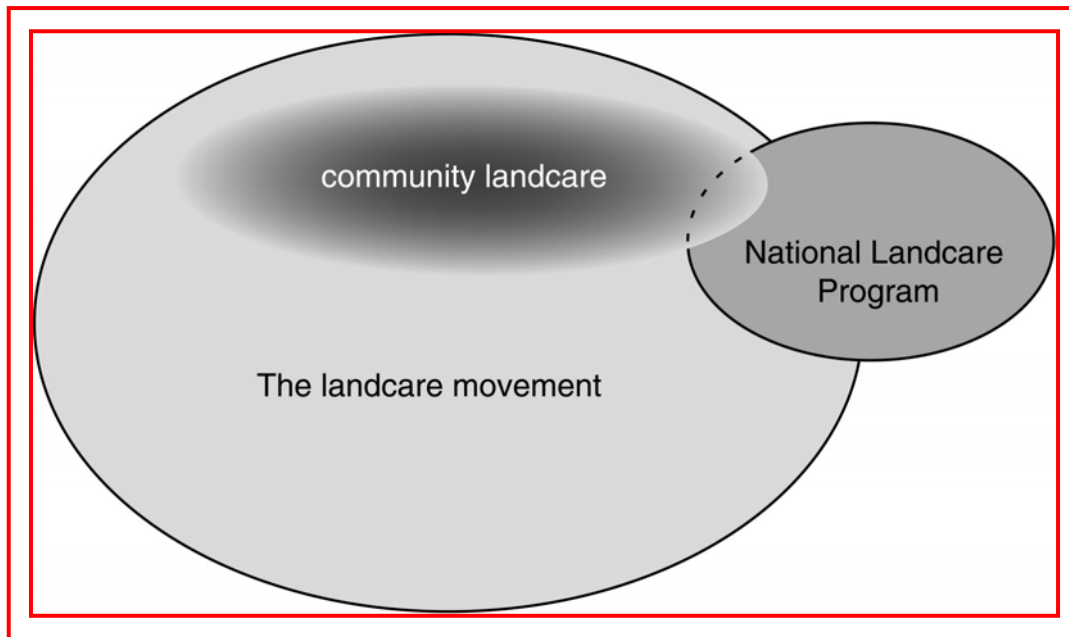
## **Abstract**

This paper discusses one aspect of a phenomenographic study that investigates experiences of individuals who volunteer their time for a variety of catchment care groups in coastal Queensland. Data were collected through group and personal interviews, which were undertaken in 2001. Interviews took place in a number of locations along the east coast of Queensland, from Brisbane to Mossman, just north of Cairns. A number of broad conceptions emerged from the data, and this paper discusses one of these, that of *empowerment*. Analysis of interviews revealed that some catchment volunteers became personally empowered, and developed skills that they would not have otherwise had. Other volunteers saw catchment volunteering as a vehicle for empowerment that allowed individuals to have a say in decision-making and governance of local resources. Many volunteers, however, revealed the difficulties associated with public participation processes, and described power struggles that arose within groups, and at a community level, when catchment group members wanted to be directly involved in decisions affecting their local environments. These struggles were further complicated by chronic lack of resources. Despite these setbacks, community catchment groups can provide personal and group empowerment, resulting in a “little voice” as opposed to none.

**Keywords:** empowerment, decision-making, participation, volunteering, community groups, landcare, integrated catchment management, natural resource management

## **Introduction**

This paper concerns aspects of empowerment associated with catchment volunteering. Catchment volunteers include individuals in not-for profit groups and programs that have a catchment focus. Catchment volunteering is generally place-based, where people work either on their own or with others in nature-based, outdoor settings. Over the past fifteen years, in response to escalating deterioration in land and water quality, thousands of Australians across the landscape have voluntarily joined environmental care groups (Byron & Curtis, 2002; Dovers, 2000). All are based on a model of community-government partnerships known as Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) (Bellamy et al, 2002), and many have a Landcare focus. The term ‘Landcare’ can be thought of as consisting of three elements: Community Landcare, the National Landcare Program, and the Landcare Movement (Cary & Webb, 2000).



**FIGURE 1: The three elements of Landcare (SOURCE: Cary & Webb 2000)**

The National Landcare Program was initiated by the Commonwealth government in the 1980's with a broad mandate to improve natural resource management (NRM) throughout Australia. The Program focuses on partnerships between community and government, and is one of many programs funded through the Commonwealth Government's National Heritage Trust (Cary & Webb, 2000). Community Landcare refers to the network of voluntary Landcare groups comprised of individuals working together to combat land degradation across Australia (Cary & Webb, 2000). Community Landcare activities are most commonly undertaken on private rural land and the owner may or may not be among the volunteers. Group activities transcend the rights and responsibilities of individual landholders (Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002). Community Landcare groups undertake a variety of activities to raise awareness and develop individual skills in dealing with land degradation problems (Ewing, 2000). Activities include meetings, ecological restoration, and field days where social networks are strengthened and information is exchanged. The variety of approaches to NRM undertaken by each group reflects the diversity of members as well as the range of issues and landscapes in which they operate (Ewing, 2000).

The Landcare Movement is characterised by individuals who hold a wide range of values – from deep ecologists to land stewards, aiming to maximise sustainable productivity of agricultural land. The Movement has grown enormously over the past fifteen years, and refers to a general land ethic and stewardship among landholders and other individuals concerned with land degradation (Byron & Curtis 2002; Cary & Webb, 2000). Stewardship implies responsibility to take care of the land for future generations of humans, rather than for the intrinsic value of the land itself (Cary & Webb, 2000). The Movement includes Community Landcare, as well as a variety of other stewardship groups such as Rivercare, Dunecare and Bushcare. Community-based environmental monitoring groups such as Saltwatch and Waterwatch are also stewardship groups, with a focus on monitoring the environmental health of land and water (Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002). In these stewardship groups the land may be

privately owned, although it is more likely to be a public resource, or to lie across several tenures such as a catchment, river or coastline (Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002).

Volunteer groups are potentially very influential. They can provide mediation between the government and individuals; opportunities for the integration of subgroups into the national society; and have the capacity to distribute power and initiate social change (Sills, 1968, cited in Pearce, 1993, p.27). Further, as Pearce (1993, p6) states ‘... all members of society benefit from the unpaid labour of many volunteers.’

Nevertheless, numerous commentators lament the lack of recognition accorded by governments to citizens and volunteers and their contributions to decision-making (eg Arnstein, 1969; Ulrich, 2000; Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002). As well, professionals often overlook the reasons why certain individuals may or may not participate in the public arena, yet these reasons result in different levels of participation, and varying degrees of success in terms of NRM outcomes (Buchy & Race, 2001; Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002). For example, some individuals may see participation as a means of raising community awareness and changing attitudes, while others may see participation as equity in decision-making, or as a means of achieving social change (Buchy & Race, 2001). To many, participation leads to empowerment - the process of gaining influence over events and outcomes of importance that may unfold the individual, group, or community level (Fawcett et al, 1995). According to Ife (2002, p53) ‘Empowerment aims to increase the power of the disadvantaged’. This paper focuses on aspects of participation that enhance the empowerment of catchment volunteers and the groups to which they belong.

Some authors contend that many citizens feel paralysed to participate in public decision-making even if they wanted to (eg Jennings & Lockie, 2002; Bellamy et al, 2002; Ulrich, 2000; Pretty, 1995; Forbes, 1987). This is partly because some individuals (especially those in marginalised groups) need help in reaching a level of confidence and competence that can allow them to participate effectively (Forbes, 1987; Jennings & Lockie, 2002). In many instances, authorities see participation as a two-edged sword, as the ensuing empowerment may result in diminished control:

The dilemma for many authorities is that they both need and fear people’s participation. They need people’s agreements and support, but they fear that this wider involvement is less controllable, less precise and so likely to slow down planning processes (Pretty, 1995, p1252).

Pretty warns that if this fear of losing control leads to tokenism, where participation is undertaken because it has to be done, public distrust will follow. Yet, if local citizens are deliberately omitted from decision-making, even more dissatisfaction may ensue (Ulrich, 2000). Sometimes it is not deliberate omission from decision-making that is a barrier to participation; rather it is the complexity of bureaucratic processes that hinders the process (Millar, 1997). Jennings & Lockie (2002) suggest that the myriad of legislation, planning processes, mandates, and management agencies, all compelling stakeholders to participate in a variety of integrated catchment management programmes along the coast of Queensland, actually inhibit participation, and reduce empowerment. This is because it is virtually impossible for all groups and stakeholders to participate effectively every time that they are expected

to. Groups and individuals with limited time and resources are being asked to attend numerous meetings, with little or no compensation (Jennings & Lockie, 2002; Bellamy et al, 2002). Missed opportunities may signal disinterest by community groups to relevant authorities, resulting in inequitable decisions, and blocking future chances for community participation. To compound the problem, there is still a lack of co-ordination within and between agencies and stakeholders, right across Australia. In Queensland, for example, there are separate bodies concerned with vegetation management, water allocation and catchment management (Bellamy et al, 2002).

In 2002, in an attempt to address some of these issues, the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines undertook a ministerial review of the current institutional arrangements for natural resource management across the State, and have recommended several new organisations and arrangements for delivering natural resource management outcomes in Queensland. A recent discussion paper produced by the QLCMC suggests several options for community involvement in the process, and invites comments from interested stakeholders (QLCMC, 2003). The aim of the new institutional arrangements is to devolve more power and responsibility to local communities.

### Background to the study

Data for the study were collected through a qualitative research approach known as phenomenography. This approach seeks variation in the ways in which respondents experience certain phenomena (Marton, 1994; Saljo, 1988). Phenomenography is an interpretive approach, based on the premise that there is variation in the ways in which people experience the same phenomenon (Marton, 1994). According to Marton (1994) and Saljo (1988), the value of phenomenographic studies lie in their ability to provide insights and reflections into peoples' experiences of everyday phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data. From the transcripts of interviews, the subjects' understandings of 'catchment volunteering' were collated, and then categorised in terms of the range of conceptions they represented. As each subject may hold several conceptions, each transcript may contain several conceptions.

The term 'catchment volunteering' was central to the study. It was assumed that this phenomenon exists within the experiences of the participants. All were chosen on assumptions that they (a) volunteered their time freely for no economic gain; (b) undertook the work of his or her own free will; and (c) worked within a not-for-profit stewardship organisation or program with a catchment focus. These assumptions are based on definitions of volunteering in the literature (eg Bates 1999; Cordingley, 2000).

It was assumed that both the volunteers and their work environments would vary considerably from place to place, so the researcher decided to capture these variations by undertaking the study along the coastal strip of Queensland, Australia. Respondents were chosen from rural, regional and urban settings from Brisbane to Mossman, north of Cairns. Thirteen personal interviews were completed, and a further thirteen group interviews were held, comprising groups of between two and ten participants. A total of 85 participants were involved in the final study. The number of participants was determined by the amount of new information each person or group was disclosing in each interview. When it became apparent that no new

information was being generated, there were no further interviews. Both personal and group interviews followed the same semi-structured format, however, the exact wording of questions may have varied among interviews, and occasionally other questions were added to follow-up on particular points.

## Results

Results presented here describe the conception of ‘empowerment’ that emerged from analysis of the interviews.

Respondents experienced empowerment on a variety of levels, including empowerment through positive experiences and personal relationships among group members; empowerment through adequate funding and resources; and empowerment through negotiation. The three forms of empowerment revealed in the study are discussed in turn, under relevant sub-headings. The findings are summarised and presented in Table 1.

### **Empowerment through personal and group transformation**

Many respondents in the study suggested that being a catchment volunteer was overall an empowering experience. Some volunteers spoke of participation in voluntary activities such as tree planting or monitoring water quality as being personally empowering, as the activities gave them the opportunity to develop skills and confidence. Other spoke of the confidence they had gained through volunteering in being able to approach influential people such as politicians. One interviewee felt that the forum provided by her group allowed her to be heard by influential people within the community:

[Volunteering] gives ‘little me’ a voice in the community that speaks to government and speaks to funding bodies (Female 3, mixed rural group, Landcare and Coastcare members. Group interview. Interview No. 14).

Another spoke of the way in which he was personally transformed by actively participating in negotiations with figures in authority:

That’s [volunteering has] changed me in the sense that I don’t feel any fear from anyone above me...The way I look at it now, I never get nervous going into a meeting with a politician or anyone...It doesn’t matter what he (the politician) thinks of me, anymore, that’s not the point... (Male, urban Landcare group. Personal interview. Interview No.2).

Some respondents described how volunteering helped to develop personal skills and feelings of self-worth by providing a focus for daily activities and social interactions.

When I first started I was a pretty timid, shy type of person. I had spent about six months on the dole, and I had casual work from time to time.....As the months progressed, and as we worked together, we found ourselves being more open. I really benefited out of that and now I am a more open type of person, I can get along and speak in groups and get along with people I don’t know. I have definitely got a lot more confidence (Male 1, Central Queensland group interview. Interview No. 15).

Another person, who had also been unemployed for some time saw volunteering as a way of coping with depression and low self-esteem:

Giving people something to do.... they raise their spirits... all sorts of awful things can happen when people get depressed, you know...you seem to sit down and go into a little hole.....so it's good to be out there and being a part of it (Female Waterwatcher. Personal interview. Interview No. 20).

These findings agree with those of Reitsma-Street, Maczewski & Neysmith, (2000), who undertook a study of volunteer experiences in multi-cultural community resource centres in Canada, where participants spoke about how volunteering helps fight depression and fears associated with living in poverty. For some individuals, catchment volunteering provided opportunities for encouraging personal relationships, and helping others who may be experiencing personal difficulties.

We find ourselves in counselling situations. Because we are there and we can actually draw it, we can centre it on a physical task, so in that way, people who are troubled about something can work it out through potting up or doing something else (Female, regional Landcare group. Small group interview. Interview No. 24).

Thus volunteers in catchment groups can help each other in dealing with low self esteem, depression, or other personal difficulties. Volunteers can help each other in other ways as well. For example, one respondent believed that through the skills she had acquired as the local Landcare coordinator, she was able to motivate some farmers to consider new practices. Rather than focusing on power over others in her group, this respondent concentrated on developing power with others in the group, to achieve outcomes that were satisfying for all members.

Getting some farmers to do all sorts of interesting things that I don't think they would have done before. I think that's something to be proud of, actually... (Female 2, mixed rural group, Landcare and Coastcare members. Group interview. Interview No.14).

Another respondent spoke of the collective power of the group when raising awareness of environmental issues within their community:

I do believe that actions speak quite loudly and if we can show that we are doing a great deal of good in the areas that we are working in and we are pulling in other people from the community then maybe people would be prepared to look and listen, say well this is a force (Male 4, urban ICM group. Group interview. Interview No. 1).

In the same group discussion, another person added:

We are so much stronger now. The people we are, we are not a big group but by golly you look at the individual skills of each member that comes and it is a powerful, it is good (Male 3, urban ICM group. Group interview. Interview No. 1).



These respondents explained that they were learning how to use the skills of group members to effect changes in their community. This conversation reflects the findings of Reitsma-Street, Maczewski & Neysmith, (2000) who discovered that the volunteers in their study were quite surprised at the amount of power they had as a group.

### **Empowerment through economic security**

Even though volunteers can help each other, and as a group achieve positive results, many respondents felt that the groups needed on going funding and access to adequate resources to remain viable. Without these, enthusiasm is hard to maintain, and active participation in decision-making can become almost impossible. For example, to attend meetings where crucial decisions are made, many catchment volunteers are required to travel long distances. Recent funding cuts now mean that most volunteers do not even have petrol expenses covered. When projects finish, resources associated with the project are withdrawn. Secure funding and sponsorship is often difficult to obtain, as this comment shows:

We write umpteen letters asking for sponsorships for vehicles, we don't have a vehicle because the last funded project finished and the vehicle went with the end of the project..... (Female 2, regional Landcare group. Small group interview. Interview No.7).

For many groups, funding is needed to lease volunteer centres. One respondent, an unpaid volunteer coordinator, explains the stress of not being able to pay rent on their building:

While we haven't got any funding for it at the moment, we're just hanging in here in an old house and we have a deal with the neighbours not to kick us out (Male, urban Landcare group. Personal interview. Interview No. 2).

The amount of time spent filling out the paper work to receive more funding, and to undertake strategic plans is a real problem for some groups:

My standing joke at the moment is looking at ... community capacity building sort of grants.... it's really worn out a lot of people really, just that whole process...(Male, member regional Landcare group and Greening Australia. Personal interview. Interview No.21).

Not all groups are quite so reliant on government support or corporate sponsorship for funding and other resources, and some have come up with strategies for becoming self-reliant, and therefore better able to achieve program outcomes. One participant explained:

We are trying to be a thriving environmental group - not down at heel and always begging, but making our own money...(Female, member of regional Landcare group Small group interview. Interview No. 24).

Her group has developed a number of money-raising schemes. For example, they hire out box-trailers to farmers and gardeners; they have a shop and a nursery (in separate

locations) that sell plants, books and other materials about ecological restoration; they have public information nights at the coordinator's home with guest-speakers, and ask for a small donation at the door. Such innovation requires constant effort and hard work, to maintain the high profile of the organisation, and to keep the money coming in. The stress of chasing funding and undertaking fund-raising activities while at the same time attempting to achieve all of the program outcomes becomes overwhelming and disempowering in the long term. These reflections confirm the points raised by Ross, Buchy & Proctor (2002), who contend that enormous efforts are required by stewardship groups to seek funding to undertake their work. The continued success of integrated catchment management and the Landcare Movement undoubtedly depends on unstinting government and community support (Ewing, 2000). Further, Ewing warns that devolving responsibility and power without adequate resources does not resolve catchment management issues, and that funding has to be allocated accordingly.

### **Empowerment through genuine partnerships that are transparent, inclusive, and based on negotiation**

Many participants in this study expressed feelings of powerlessness when it came to decision-making, especially when they attended meetings with different stakeholders. There was general feeling that decisions made regarding natural resource management were one-sided, and that volunteers were often the ones left out of the decision-making process. According to Ife (2002, p54) participants must be able to 'play the game' effectively to be able to influence decision-making. 'Playing the game' includes the ability to perceive the motives of other players, and to understand how those in power can try to manipulate others. The process is not always clear, and participants are often left with the feeling that others, who do know how to 'play the game', have manipulated them. For example, some respondents expressed frustrations in working with agencies such as waterboards, local councils, and other government bodies. One respondent in this study commented:

Somebody said to me the other day, "You and Gillian, you are the only 2 who are ordinary people, who aren't being manipulated by the Waterboard"  
(Female 1, regional Landcare group. Small group interview. Interview No.7).

One group particularly focused on issues of power, and how power struggles are central to daily activities. Members talked about their relationship with their local Council, and how important that relationship was to achieving their goals. They openly discussed many of the frustrations that they collectively felt when working with politicians and bureaucrats.

Sometimes I feel that the bureaucratic process deliberately puts up proposals that are extreme and totally unfeasible, knowing that we will then expend effort fighting against them and come back to what they intend to give in the first place (Male 5, urban ICM group. Group interview. Interview No.1).

Yet, on a different occasion, one of the respondents described a situation where the group was able to influence the Council to such an extent, that they stopped a potentially damaging development from going ahead. One of the keys to success,

according to this respondent, was ‘hastening slowly’, and trying to understand the perspectives of bureaucrats when dealing with government agencies.

In some instances, participants explained that volunteers also need to learn how to ‘play the game’ within their group, as some volunteers do not always “talk” among themselves very well. One interviewee recounted how the ICM group to which she belonged comprised a mixture of urban conservationists and rural landholders, who had very different approaches to environmental management:

When I say we’ve asked them to contribute to our vision for the environment, we have also asked them to do it on our terms. We’ve sat dairy farmers, who have been up since three in the morning, in a catchment committee meeting, which has gone on all day and the poor devils have had to tear home and milk again at four o’clock, and they’ve just gone to sleep. We’re asking them to do everything on our terms. It’s not going to work (Female, member of regional Waterwatch, ICM & Landcare groups. Personal interview. Interview No. 9).

Yet in other groups, members had a say in how they would like to be included in the process, and were welcomed in all spheres of activity, from routine tasks to planning, management and decision-making. This inclusive approach resulted in an atmosphere of trust, friendship and inclusion among volunteers, and these groups retained members for long periods of time. The following comment captures these characteristics:

One lady said to me, she said, “You know, when I come back to the group, I really love coming back because nobody says, “Well, you weren’t here last week.” It’s a case of “Jeez it’s good to see you again. What have you been doing?” (Female 3, regional tree-planting group. Small group interview. Interview No. 22).

This sense of freedom to be able to choose *when* to participate is really important for some people. Freedom to choose *what tasks* to do is also important. In organisations where volunteers were given a range of tasks to choose from, commitment seemed to be greater. In these organisations, volunteers spoke of this freedom of choice as a form of personal empowerment:

*Its quite nice to just come in as a volunteer and kind of pick and choose the things, you do* (Female 2, regional Landcare. Small group interview. Interview No.7).

This sense of freedom is particularly important for people on low incomes, as there are not many opportunities for freedom of choice in other aspects of their lives, as Ife (2002, p57) explains:

...one of the major consequences of poverty is that people have little choice or power to make decisions about their own lives. ....

In one group, volunteers explained that they reached their NRM outcomes through consideration of other volunteers’ views, and careful negotiation with others in the

group. As a result, the group experimented with different management approaches based on the perspectives and experiences of different individuals in the group:

People are still experimenting and trying different ways to see and treat the banks and treat the floodplains and everything else so I think that is quite interesting and I guess we will only learn that as we go along and maybe make mistakes (Female 1, urban ICM group. Group interview. Interview No.1).

In this study, groups with an inviting, inclusive atmosphere, where all members are welcome and encouraged to participate, yet not obligated to do so, generally had a higher retention of volunteers than those where there was tension and unresolved conflict due to misunderstandings. These findings agree with the points raised by Foster-Fishman et al (2001) who contend that community involvement in environmental management should be easy, welcoming, and fit around daily routines. The complexity of people's lives, whether in urban, regional or urban settings, has to be well understood and accepted, if they are to participate meaningfully in catchment care groups.

In situations where group members are negotiating with other stakeholders in the wider community, Ewing (2000) suggests that there needs to be clear guidelines regarding expectations for all stakeholders, so that everyone is clear about why they are participating, and what the likely outcomes might be. Stoll-Kleeman & O'Riordan (2002) believe that a partnership approach including the provision of social contracts and appropriate institutional arrangements is the most promising way to achieve successful outcomes for sustaining local biodiversity.

As well as having appropriate institutional arrangements, Jeanrenaud (1999) maintains that understanding social relationships in local communities is critical to effective natural resource management. Community life is complex and includes relationships between individuals and the range of social groups to which they belong. Different types of social groups and communities exist, reflecting a diversity of political, economic, social and cultural influences. Van Noordwijk, Tomich & Verbist (2001) propose a 'negotiation support model' to highlight similarities and differences in personal perspectives, and where differences occur, the model helps to develop suitable and innovative options for decision-making and reconciliation (van Noordwijk, Tomich & Verbist, 2001). Understanding the range of 'mental models' that each person brings to the negotiating table and allowing each perspective to be heard, can lead to empowerment for both individuals and organisations. Understanding the needs and motivations of individuals can lead to different natural resource management outcomes, each of which may be appropriate under different circumstances (Buchy & Race, 2001; Ross, Buchy & Proctor, 2002).

## Conclusion

Results of this study confirm the findings of Ross, Buchy & Proctor (2002) and Buchy & Race (2001) that the complexity of participation in natural resource management is more complex than a hierarchical, uni-dimensional ladder such as the ones proposed by Arnstein (1969) and Pretty (1995). Personal, social and environmental benefits associated with empowerment of catchment volunteers are due to a variety of relationships formed through volunteering. For example, this study suggests that empowerment leading to personal confidence by undertaking new

or challenging tasks can boost self-esteem and lower rates of depression, ultimately improving the quality of life for volunteers, their friends and families. Empowerment through group learning and sharing skills, which are passed on to new members, can lead to positive and long-term environmental outcomes. Through an understanding of the different forms of empowerment that is occurring within catchment groups, it may be possible to encourage appropriate levels of participation by volunteers in a variety of group activities. The forms of empowerment revealed by participants in this study, and summarised in Table 1 may occur simultaneously – one form does not negate the presence of others.

**TABLE 1: Forms of empowerment in catchment management**

<b>Form of empowerment (NOT a hierarchy)</b>	<b>Description and possible outcomes</b>
<b>Empowerment through personal and group transformation</b>	Volunteering results in personal changes such as increased self-esteem, confidence, learning new skills, and developing friendships. Participation involves undertaking regular NRM on-ground activities and attending meetings
<b>Empowerment through economic security.</b>	Community groups should receive on-going government support in terms of adequate funds and resources. Economic incentives are provided so that volunteers can participate effectively in NRM eg to attend meetings or implement NRM projects. In addition, citizens and groups should take fund-raising initiatives independent of influential agencies, and this way, retain control over how resources are used.
<b>Empowerment through genuine partnerships that are transparent, inclusive, and based on negotiation</b>	Clear guidelines and expectations for all stakeholders participating in NRM. Implementation of social contracts to be adhered to by all stakeholders. Volunteering is seen as non-threatening, inclusive and welcoming. Activities are scheduled to suit the majority of participants. Social benefits of volunteering are considered to be of paramount importance. Volunteering is centred on the needs of the volunteers, as much as the goals of the organisation. Citizens can participate with confidence and competence, and can have an equal say in decision-making. Each individual is listened to within an atmosphere of respect and trust. Public accountability is assured. Relationships among volunteers and between groups and agencies are based on understanding, appreciating and utilising the range of different perspectives, knowledge, skills and experiences held by individuals. Experimental approaches are preferred for solving NRM problems.

In summary, data obtained in this study, and reflected in current literature, suggest that volunteering is empowering when it contributes to the acquisition of personal skills and confidence of each volunteer; it enables individuals to participate in decision-making in inclusive, equitable and meaningful ways; and, it is undertaken within the context of a well-resourced, supportive group that can negotiate skilfully with a variety of influential individuals and organisations.

Results indicate that along the coast of Queensland, there are unresolved issues with respect to internal and external power struggles, and these are further complicated by chronic lack of resources. The findings presented here confirm the observations of Ross, Buchy & Proctor (2001) that despite some obvious differences in personal perspectives, stewardship volunteers have developed a collective ethos and sense of shared responsibility for natural resource management, helping people to understand the impacts of their activities on the environment. Although there may be frustration with authority figures, individuals and groups can develop power of their own, as long as they are patient and persistent. Community catchment groups can provide personal and group empowerment, resulting in a “little voice” as opposed to none.

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