



Growing trees and growing change

How a small amount of funding can
create a big change for the community



West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) would like to thank the Merriman Creek Landcare Group and the Yarram Yarram Landcare Network for their assistance in the evaluation.

We would also like to thank Think Impact for their ongoing support and guidance throughout the evaluation.



Contents

Introduction	4
Executive summary	5
The Merriman Creek Landcare Group and the Regional Riparian Action Plan	6
Five key findings	7
How did we do this SROI?	9
Theory of change	10
Evidencing outcomes	11
Results	14

Introduction

West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) has long recognised the positive impact Landcare projects have on the local community. Gippsland Landcare networks have been a key delivery partner for WGCMA for close to 20 years.

In 2015, WGCMA received Victorian State Government funding as part of the Regional Riparian Action Plan (RRAP) to support community works along waterways. WGCMA directed \$15,000 of this funding to the Merriman Creek Landcare Group to undertake on-ground works such as tree planting, fencing and weed control. The group managed all aspects of project delivery including hiring contractors and deciding where the funding should be spent.

This report provides a summary of the results of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation that analyses the social value created by the Merriman Creek Landcare Group project.

An SROI is a framework for identifying and accounting for social change experienced by key stakeholders by assigning monetary proxies to the change. Although the values are expressed in dollars, they do not equate to financial return.

An SROI process is guided by the following seven principles (The SROI Network, 2012):

1. Involve stakeholders
2. Understand what changes
3. Value the things that matter
4. Only include what is material
5. Do not over claim
6. Be transparent
7. Verify the result

This report describes and values the outcomes experienced by stakeholders as a result of the Regional Riparian Action Plan funding according to these principles.

“There was a renewed enthusiasm for the group as a result of the Landcare funding”

Executive summary

The Social Return on Investment for this Landcare project indicates that for every \$1 spent on a Landcare project there is at least \$3.41 return in social value. This includes increased social connectedness, emotional wellbeing, increased NRM knowledge and skills, improved group dynamics, increased physical activity/participation, reduced labour and chemical costs (better weed control) and improved relationships with local community. For more information on the Social Return on Investment process, please see page 9.

Group members were separated into two categories: those who did a project (named members who did a project) and those who did not do a project (named members who did not do a project). Both these groups combined are called group members.



The Merriman Creek Landcare Group and the Regional Riparian Action Plan

Landcare is a grassroots movement of individuals and groups focusing on managing the environment in their local area.

The Merriman Creek Landcare Group is located in Gippsland in Eastern Victoria. Founded in 1985, the group has 33 active members and meets approximately four times a year at the Stradbroke Hall.

A major focus of the group is the Merriman Creek which flows through the group's area from the headwaters of Merriman Creek at Balook to Seaspray, where it provides potable water for the community's residents. Over its lifetime the group has managed and delivered a range of projects, on public and private land, that have helped improved the health of the creek. This includes:

- fencing off waterways from stock
- organising sustainable farming programs such as pasture and soil health improvements
- revegetation and remnant protection projects
- weed control and fox and rabbit control programs.
- improve water quality in the creek.

The aim of these activities is to improve the health of the creek by increasing biodiversity, reducing sediment and nutrient run-off and removing pest habitat.

In 2015, the WGCMA received funding from the Victorian State Government as part of the Regional Riparian Action Plan (RRAP) to support community works along waterways. WGCMA directed \$15,000 of this funding to the Merriman Creek Landcare Group to undertake on-ground works such as tree planting, fencing and weed control.

Expenditure break down	Estimated amount	Provided to	
Trees	750 trees	Landcare Group	\$1,000
Weed control	2 hectares	Landcare Group	\$4,500
Project management		Landcare Group	\$2,000
Fencing	460 metres	Landcare Group	\$5,500
Willow removal		CMA to pay directly to contractor	\$2,000
Total			\$15,000

Five key findings

The Regional Riparian Action Plan funding goes far beyond simply improving the health of the creek. The changes experienced by Landcare group members (both those that undertook a project with the funding and those who did not) are profound and create significant social value through direct value experienced by group members, the wider community and agency staff.

There were significant positive changes in all of the outcomes surveyed



1

Increased group purpose and dynamics



2

Increased emotional wellbeing



3

Improved connection within the local community



4

Reduced labour and chemical costs



5

Improved NRM skills and awareness

The average member who did a project

I have been a member of the Merriman Creek Landcare Group for 5-10 years (62.5%)

and am active or very active in my level of participation in the group (62.5%)

As part of this project I was funded to undertake weed control on my property (75%)

and I spent more than 3 hours on it (57%)

I would prefer this Landcare project over a new water tank (75%)

I feel good about being part of this project (87.5%)

and feel this project will save me money in the next 5 years (71.43%)

This project makes me feel connected to my neighbours (100%)

and as a result of Landcare I know more people in the community (42%)

I feel recent funding to our group has enabled our group to have a purpose (85%)

How did we do this SROI?

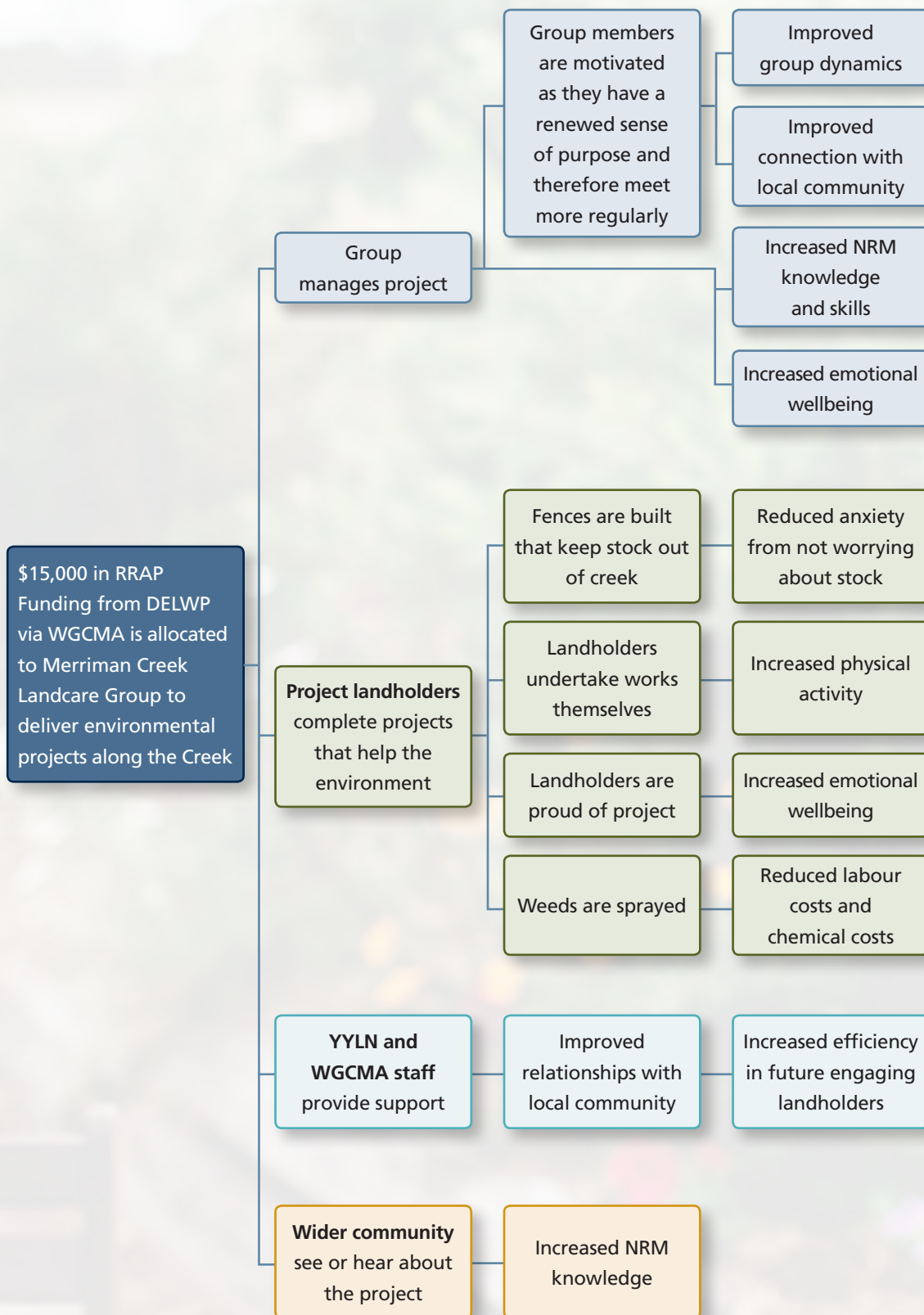
This study followed this SROI approach:

SROI approach	WGCMA approach
1. Establishing scope and identifying stakeholders	Stakeholder meeting with beneficiary groups at the Stradbroke Hall assisted in planning what gets measured and how.
2. Mapping outcomes	Through engaging with the stakeholders, WGCMA developed a theory of change, which shows the relationship between inputs, outputs and outcomes.
3. Evidencing outcomes and giving them value (find appropriate proxies and indicators)	WGCMA conducted a survey with group members and staff to gather evidence of positive and negative change. Many of the outcomes were not traded in markets and as a result their value was not recognised. WGCMA gave them a financial value to non-financial outcomes (proxy).
4. Establishing impact (deadweight, attribution, displacement and drop-off)	Having collected evidence on outcomes and monetised them, those aspects of change that would have happened anyway or are a result of other factors were eliminated from consideration.
5. Calculating the SROI	This stage involved adding up all the benefits, subtracting any negatives and comparing the result to the investment. This is also where the sensitivity of the results were be tested.
6. Reporting, using and embedding	

The SROI Network (2012)



Theory of change



Evidencing outcomes

The research design comprised of stakeholder interviews and a survey sent to all members of the Merriman Creek Landcare Group. Members were separated into two categories: those who did a project (called project landholders) and those who did not do a project (called group members).

Each of the outcomes identified are defined by a set of indicators. The indicators are mostly 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Respondents were also asked a range of open questions to gather broader answers to questions.

West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority staff were interviewed on their thoughts of being involved in the project.



57% of Group Members are characterised as 'active members' meaning they often participate in events, meetings, field days etc.

Top three responses - members who did a project

- Funding has enabled our group to have purpose
- Feel good about being part of the project
- Makes me feel more connected to my neighbours

Top three responses - members who did a project

- Landcare Group is creating positive environmental benefits on Merriman Creek
- Helps me feel like I am making a positive contribution to the community
- Makes me feel good

Top three responses - members who did a project

- I now know who I can contact when I need to engage people in the area
- I have a better relationship with the group members
- I will spend less time engaging people in the area





Group Purpose and Dynamics

The greatest outcome was the renewed purpose for the group. 100% of members who did a project and 85% of group members agreed that the funding gave the group a greater sense of purpose.

"The money had resulted in better attendance at Landcare meetings, more interaction at meetings and more enthusiasm to apply for other project funds"

"It brought members together for a common purpose"

"Without the funding the group would have continued to limp along without any enthusiasm"



Emotional wellbeing

Improved emotional wellbeing generated the second most valuable outcome for all Landcare members.

The research revealed that 100% of group members experienced greater emotional well-being from being part of a Landcare group. Reported indicators of increased emotional wellbeing included feeling good about being part of the project, feeling good about being part of the group or making a positive contribution to the community.

"There's a lot going on in the world, and being part of Landcare makes me feel less guilty. I feel good about doing my bit"



Improved connection with local community

Group members overwhelmingly experienced an increase in connection within the local community.

42.8% of group members said they knew more people in their community as a result of Landcare. Having a shared sense of purpose, something to talk about and a reason to get together all increases community connection. People who are more socially connected to community, to family, to friends, are happier, they're physically healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected (Waldinger, 2015).

100% of members who did a project said the project made them feel more connected to their neighbours.

"The money had resulted in better attendance at Landcare meetings, more interaction at meetings and more enthusiasm to apply for other project funds"

"I have a greater respect for group members as a result of working on the project"



Reduced labour and chemical costs (better weed control)

Project landholders said the project would reduce their ongoing labour and chemical costs.

Undertaking weed control and putting up fencing will reduce the ongoing costs for maintenance in future years.

71.4% of members who did a project said this project will save them money over the next five years.

“The project will reduce costs and labour over the next five years”

“Now that my blackberries are dead, there is no harbour for pests and no seeds to spread.”

“Without this project, blackberry management along the creek would have been ad hoc, rather than planned”

“This project stops neighbour’s cattle crossing the creek into a protected area”



NRM knowledge and skills

Improved NRM knowledge and skills was the fifth outcome achieved as a result of the project. Landcare group funding gives members the opportunity to develop project management, group management and NRM delivery skills.

57% of members who did a project and 71% of members who did not do a project agreed that being part of the Landcare group has improved their environmental management skills.

Landcare knowledge is also shared ‘over the fence’ to neighbours and the wider community. The study found that a Landcare group’s reach is significant and extends beyond the members; for every one member, at least one other person was spoken to about this Landcare project.

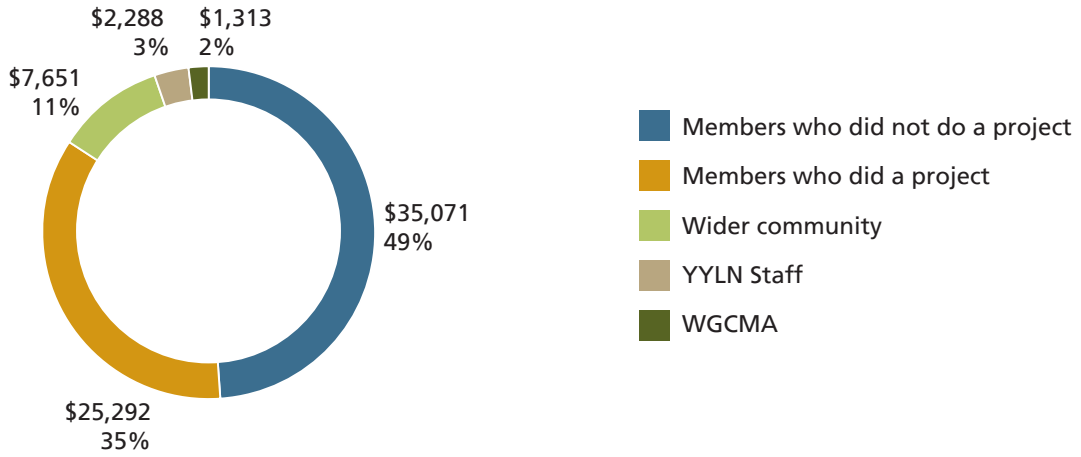
Group members spoke to 53 members of the public about the project and believe 46 of these people are likely to be more aware of environmental issues.

“Now I know who to contact when I want to do works in the area”

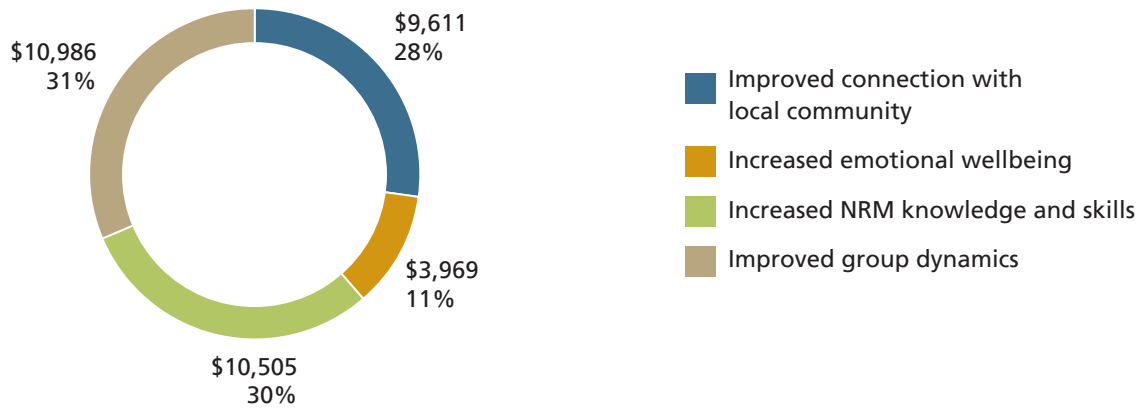


Results

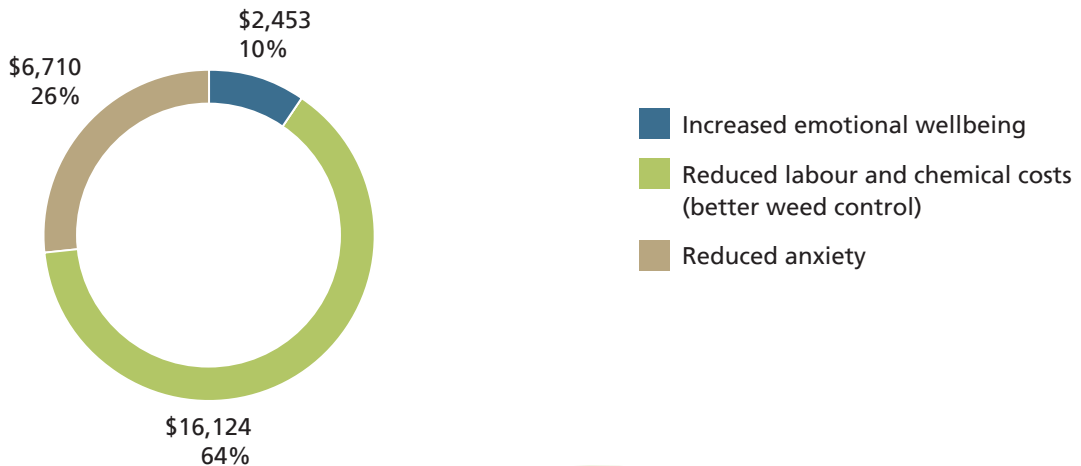
Social value by stakeholder group



Social value for members who did not do a project



Social value for members who did do a project



Implications of results

The environment is not the only thing that benefits from a Landcare project. Landcare projects also have a significant benefit to the local community increasing skills, emotional wellbeing and connection. While there is no doubt that this Landcare project will benefit the environment, this report shows that the social impact of a project is also significant enough to warrant investment.

This report shows the Victorian State Government and WGCMA's investment in the Merriman Creek Landcare Group is helping bring purpose and energy to the group.

Although the Merriman Creek may not be a high priority reach, the social investment in the landscape is worthy.

For more information about the WGCMA visit www.wgcma.vic.gov.au

Reference:

- The SROI Network (2012) A guide to Social Return on Investment, available at <http://socialvalueint.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-SROI-Guide-2012.pdf>
- Waldinger (2015) What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness, available at https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/transcript?language=en



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