



Painting the Desert Pink:

Where Place Making, Social Cohesion and Wellbeing Collide

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ABSTRACT

In remote communities of western Queensland, where gatherings are rare and take the form of gymkhanas and campdrafts, women hardly take time out to invest in themselves. During droughts, the pressures are so great that social events are neglected in favour of survival of stock and life. This paper reports on a participatory action research project exploring the value of a community development approach to drought. The community-driven event for women discussed in this paper is shown to help build strong remote communities, contributing not only to improved social and emotional wellbeing, but also to a strong and healthy landscape in which rural and remote communities reside.

INTRODUCTION

Rural Australia is currently in the grip of an ecological crisis. The environment is altering from a rich and vibrant source of life to a dry and barren landscape in the grip of drought. The drought is seemingly determined to destroy the glue that binds rural communities, carrying unbearable implications for social and emotional wellbeing (Alston and Kent, 2004). Drought, influenced by climate change on a planet further challenged by human activities, demands that social workers situate their responses to personal stress and family reactions in the context of climate-related issues (Coates and Gray, 2012).

The Channel Country is a region in the south west corner of Queensland. It is a region of prolific beauty, with intertwined rivulets that run into the Lake Eyre basin. It is also a sparsely populated region, with its inhabitants widely dispersed on cattle stations and in small towns. The Channel Country is currently in the grip of one of the most concerning droughts on record; many graziers¹ have had limited rainfall for four years (Nunn, 2014). During times of despair, loss of hope, and immense stress, opportunities to gather are rare – yet they offer much needed escapes from the demands of life on the land (Alston and Kent, 2008). Initiated in 2012, the Channel Country Ladies Day brings women together from across remote western Queensland, the Far North of South Australia, and northern New South Wales (NSW) each October to inspire, empower and celebrate women of the Outback. In a familiar and comfortable setting within this remote region, the shared bonding of station women and remote town women who call the Channel Country home is at the heart of the event (Cock, 2007).

This article reports on research that explores the reach and impact of a community development event, the Channel Country Ladies Day, on the lives of women in the Channel Country. Utilising participatory action research methodology, the project explores how Ladies Day reduces social isolation through networking, and by encouraging women to pursue their goals and aspirations, improves their social and emotional wellbeing (Cavaye, 2001). By supporting women to nurture themselves and their families, this research examines how building healthy and strong minds contributes to resilient communities and resilient landscapes (Kingsley et al., 2009).

¹ A grazier is a person who rears or fattens cattle or sheep for the market; the term refers to a large scale sheep or cattle farmer.



The literature review outlines the nature of drought, its effects on the economic sphere of rural communities, and the subsequent consequences on social connections within rural communities. Following Cavaye's (2001) approach to community development, the literature review explores the link between personal health and wellbeing, and the state of the land. Reporting on findings from the two chosen research methods, the Partnerships Analysis Tool and open-ended interviews, the paper then explores the reach and impact of the Channel Country Ladies Day according to the women who both organised and attended the event. The Discussion and Conclusion sections of this paper provide an opportunity to consider the potential future of the Channel Country Ladies Day, or similar events, for improving social and emotional wellbeing in rural communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DROUGHT, THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE RURAL ECONOMY

Rural communities are more intimately connected with the environment and at the beck and call of the weather than any other community (Alston and Kent, 2008). They are the first to feel the effects of our current ecological crisis, which has led to land degradation, pollution and drought (Coates, 2003). Drought places human existence in perspective – people are merely specks on the world's horizon (Jones, 2010). Drought impacts on water availability, agricultural production and bush fire regimes, the end shrouded in uncertainty as dry periods and water scarcity increase due to the impacts of El Niño,² which are felt globally (Sherval and Askew, 2011). With prolonged drought, critical social resources are depleted through the lowering of social capital. The socio-economic outcomes of drought have the greatest direct impact on mental health and wellbeing by increasing vulnerability and adverse outcomes, particularly when changes to the vitality of the natural landscape are profound (Albrecht et al., 2007, cited in Tonna et al., 2009). Lowered income, increased debt, prolonged environmental stress, land degradation and a loss of hope have led to 'mental health problems for some, and to the tragedy of despair and suicide for a few' (Berry et al., 2008, p. 3). During drought, farm Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and farm incomes fall, and dependence on off-farm incomes rise (Lu and Hedley, 2004, cited in Tonna et al., 2009). Driven out of farming by an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, there is a decline in the number of people and families employed in agriculture (ABS, 2008, cited in Tonna et al., 2009; Pearce et al. 2010). Drought affects not only farming families; the impact is felt by the wider community and local businesses as well (Laoire, 2001, cited in Alston and Kent, 2008).

SOCIAL IMPACT OF DROUGHT

Drought places increasing demands on one's time, as graziers are forced into feeding supplements to stock, and checking that water is available to stock. Animals are very vulnerable in such times. In these ways, drought accelerates the deterioration of rural communities' social structures, networks and infrastructures, which are already deteriorating as a result of the longer term agricultural restructuring taking place within many agriculturally-based communities (Crockett, 2002, cited in Tonna et al., 2009). Such changes negatively impact on communities' ability to respond to pressures, increasing their vulnerability to mental health problems. Focusing on their difficult circumstances and stresses can impede the ability of local community members to come together for socialising, through sport and recreation for example, which keeps rural communities active, well and prosperous (Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel, 2008, cited in Sherval and Askew, 2011; Alston and Kent, 2008).

In rural communities, mental health issues exist within a backdrop of limited access to health services (Nelson and Park 2006; Smith et al., 2008, cited in Tonna et al., 2009), and a stigma surrounding the lack of knowledge regarding mental health problems (Judd et al., 2006, cited in Tonna et al., 2009). Current service models do not address the current resource limitations, geography and social characteristics of rural communities (Tonna et al., 2009). Further, the dominant form of rural identity, which has served men well during good and flourishing times, is a stoicism that prevents blokes asking for help (Courtenay, 2006, cited in Alston and Kent, 2008). Many women, too, have been expected to adopt this stoicism.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

A community development approach to mental health is most effective when conducted at a local level with the active participation of the affected community (Hart et al., 2011). Introduced in 2007, the Rural Adversity

² El Niño refers to an irregularly occurring and complex series of climatic changes affecting the equatorial Pacific region and beyond every few years. Trade winds lead to the rise in sea surface temperature in the Pacific. The effects of El Niño include reversal of wind patterns across the Pacific, drought in Australia and Asia, and unseasonal heavy rain in South America.



Mental Health Program, funded by the NSW Government, partnered with established service providers to offer women's Pamper Days, designed to support women impacted by drought (Hart et al., 2011). The Channel Country Ladies Day draws on this model of connecting participants with service providers.

According to Cavaye's (2006) approach to community development, community members are best positioned to engage in a process aimed at improving the social, economic and environmental situation of the community. Cavaye (2001) argues that rural community vitality relies on communities 'rethinking assets, developing networks, building local cooperation and acting on local passion and motivation' (p. 109). Community development improves the ability of communities to make better decisions collectively regarding the use of infrastructure, labour and knowledge (Schaffer, unpublished, cited in Cavaye, 2006). Cavaye argues that successful community development not only contributes to infrastructure or community organisation, but also changes community thinking, networks and overall capabilities. In other words, effective community development provides the opportunity to redefine apparent needs and local capabilities. Lasting development in rural communities relies on community ownership, local leadership, action, rethinking and motivation (Cavaye, 2001). A broad-based rural development agenda needs to recognise and foster passionate people, and see emotional capital as a real component of community development (Cavaye, 1999).

THE LANDSCAPE AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Caring for country is inextricably linked with caring for health and wellbeing in rural communities (Kingsley et al., 2009). As Guest et al. (1999) acknowledge, the health of the population depends on the quality of the environment in which people reside. Thus, protection of the environment is essential for promoting health and preventing illness – it is a social determinant of health, as acknowledged by the World Health Organisation. This concept draws on Aboriginal people's conceptions of health as social, emotional, cultural and environmental wellbeing, in which connection to country, and one's sense of community and kin, is integral (Kingsley et al., 2009). Thus, the Channel Country Ladies Day is grounded in building a strong community of women that is confident in caring for the land, and is critical for improving ecological literacy (Orr, 1992).

THE CHANNEL COUNTRY LADIES DAY CONCEPT

In 2010, the researcher attended the Daly Waters Ladies Day in the Victoria River District. This event provides an opportunity for women to come together to lunch, shop, and socialise. As a participant, these events appeared as a potential means of bringing together women in isolated areas for improved social and emotional wellbeing – expanding beyond 'feel-good' social and fundraising activities to incorporate opportunities for skill development, confidence and cultural development.

Upon moving to work on a property in the Channel Country region as a governess, the researcher realised there were limited opportunities for social connections outside the regular gymkhanas and campdrafts in the region. As a governess, the researcher's role on the property was to teach the manager's four young boys through School of the Air.³ Establishing the Channel Country Ladies Day was a way of providing women in the area with the opportunity to don hats and heels for a weekend. In 2012, the inaugural Channel Country Ladies Day was held at Durham Downs Station, a remote S. Kidman & Co. station close to the Queensland-South Australia border. Drawing eighty women from across far western Queensland, northern South Australia and northern New South Wales, the event was well-regarded as an opportunity for women in remote areas to gather, connect, inspire and cement their social and emotional selves.

The weekend was organised by the researcher in conjunction with her employer and the mother of the children taught, with whom there was (and remains) high levels of trust. The co-facilitator had previously organised a centenary event for 300 people at Durham Downs station, and was familiar with the logistical issues associated with holding an event in a remote location.

In 2012 a pilot arts program was run at the Ladies Day to gain a better understanding of how women would respond to arts-based initiatives. Local artist Lyn Barnes co-ordinated a community canvas, where women were encouraged to experiment with their artistic talent. Along with developing regional skills, this pilot exemplified how an Artsbreak Area at the Ladies Day could contribute to greater community capacity and the development of self-confidence and resilience. As women discovered their passion for the arts, the Artsbreak Area served to enhance and advance talent, as well as develop visual arts skills within the remote area. This pilot was expanded in 2013 to include nine artists working in an outdoor Artsbreak Area.

Following the success of the 2012 Channel Country Ladies Day, the second annual Ladies Day was

³ School of the Air is a correspondence school that caters for the primary education of students who are too isolated to attend a conventional school. Classes were traditionally conducted by radio, but now utilise the internet.



held at Noccundra in far western Queensland, from 18-20 October 2013. Noccundra is a meeting place for landholders and residents in remote Western Queensland. It is located 160km west of the nearest town of Thargomindah, within the Bulloo Shire Council area, an area with a sparse population of only 380 people across 74,000km. Noccundra consists of a pub, tennis court and race track. Most members of the surrounding community are employed in the agriculture and labouring industry, and women in particular are both geographically and socially isolated. The rare opportunities for the community to meet occur at local campdrafts and rodeos, held twice a year at Noccundra.

A committee was formed to run the 2013 event. Women across the region were invited via email, word of mouth, and phone conversation to submit an expression of interest to join the committee. Capturing a wide cross-section of geographical areas, disciplines and ages, the committee was designed to receive input from towns across the Channel Country region. The Royal Flying Doctor Service offered use of infrastructure to support regular teleconferences for committee members. All of the committee members who participated in the development of the 2013 event were Anglo-Saxon, reflecting the dominant make up of station managers and owners in this region of western Queensland (see Table 1 below).⁴ The participatory action research described in this article involved most of these committee members as participants, and took place during and immediately after the 2013 event.

Representative	Organisation	Location	Age Bracket (years)
Researcher	Co-facilitator from 2012 / Volunteer	Longreach	20 - 24
Representative 1	Co-facilitator from 2012 / Volunteer / Station Manager	Via Eromanga	35 - 39
Representative 2	Volunteer / Department Natural Resources & Mines	Roma	25 - 29
Representative 3	Volunteer / Governess	Via Windorah	25 - 29
Representative 4	RFDS Longreach Social & Emotional Wellbeing Team	Longreach	40 - 44
Representative 5	RFDS Charleville	Charleville	50 - 54
Representative 6	Volunteer / Freelance Journalist	Birdsville	25 - 29
Representative 7	Volunteer / Station Owner	Stonehenge	50 - 54
Representative 8	Frontier Services Outback Links / Volunteer	Charleville	40 - 44
Representative 9	Charleville Neighbourhood Centre	Charleville	30 - 34
Representative 10	Volunteer / Station Manager	Innamincka	55 - 59

Table 1. Ladies Day Committee Members 2013

One hundred and twenty women, along with a number of brave male helpers, travelled from across the entirety of Southern Queensland to attend the event at remote Noccundra. Participants, also primarily Anglo-Saxon, came from Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Victoria.

⁴ Note that in 2014, the event was held at Betoota, in the Diamantina Shire, a shire in which one quarter of the population is Aboriginal. Due to the remaining strong links with the local people in this Shire, we worked with the community to ensure that we respectfully acknowledged the relationship to land and the role of women in the local community. One of the local elders was invited to join in the committee. Two of the local female elders, themselves artists, engaged women in the Artsbreak Area through their community canvas. They also shared their dreamtime stories with the women at their impressive art installation piece, the Snake, located on the side of a hill not far from Betoota. The involvement of local Aboriginal people in the weekend, through the arts, added immensely to the rich nature of the weekend.



In addition, some women travelled from Brisbane, Toowoomba and the regional centres of Townsville, Emerald, Roma, Longreach and St. George, along with the local Channel Country towns of Innamincka, Birdsville, Windorah, Eromanga, Quilpie, Charleville, Thargomindah and Tibboburra, and properties in the Channel Country region. The shaded area on the map in Figure 1 represents the geographical location of the women and the distances travelled to attend the event. Those that came from urban centres as guest speakers aren't represented on the map.

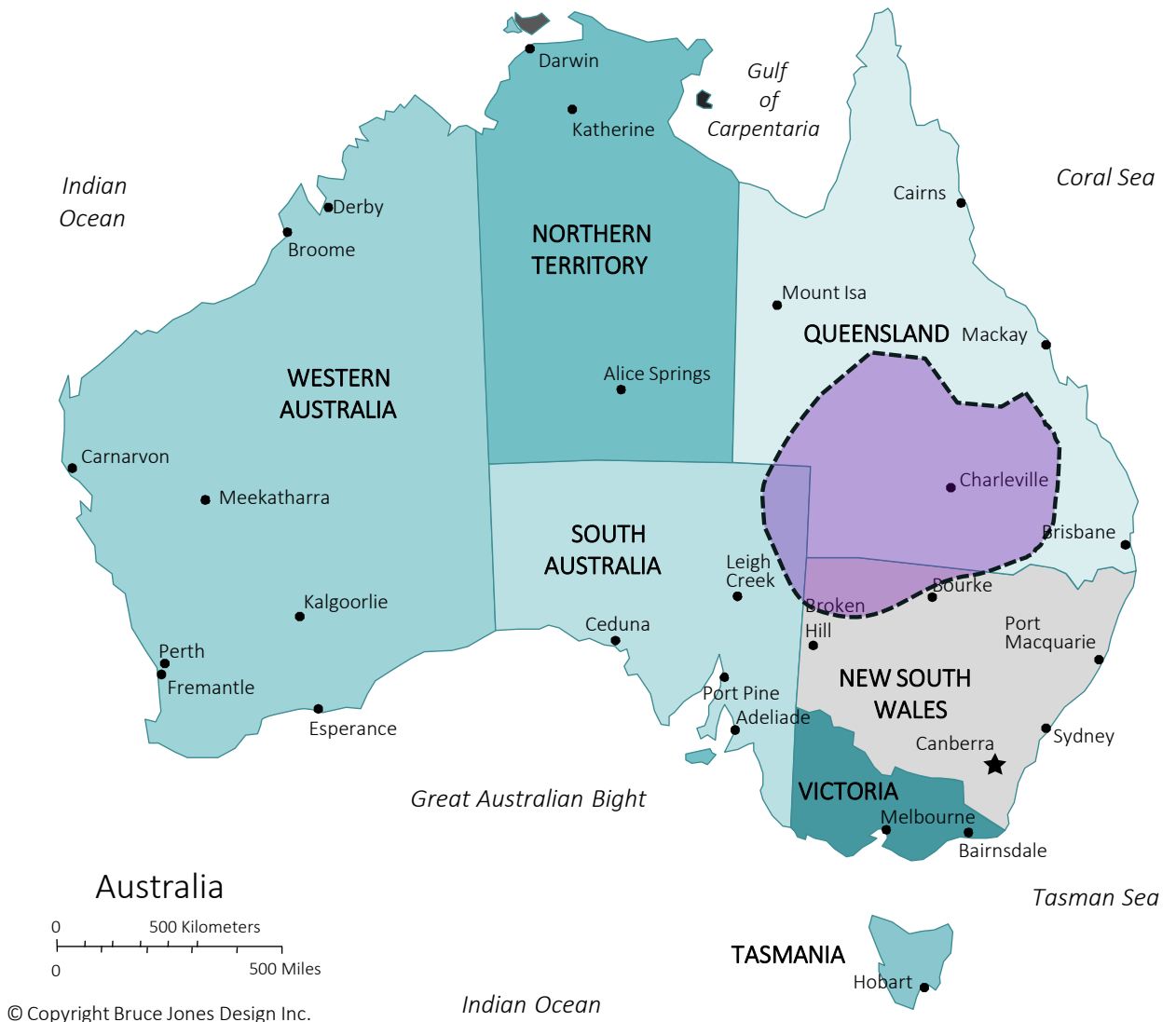


Figure 1. Map of the geographic spread of participants in the weekend. #16281. Australia Map, Administrative Districts, Capitals. Edited with permission. www.mapsfordesign.com

The Ladies Day runs over a weekend each October, with a programme that consists of keynote speakers, concurrent workshops, and an opportunity for women to book an appointment with a massage therapist, beautician or hairdresser, or naturopath. The event is also attended by the local women's health nurse, a female doctor, and allied health professionals. With workshops on mindfulness for positive mental health and wellbeing, grief and loss, understanding of sexuality, fitness, health and nutrition – and with access to women's health professionals – wellbeing is at the core of the weekend. The arts are a critical part of the weekend, and through a partnership with Red Ridge Interior Queensland, the local arts organisation, the Channel Country Ladies Day has each year provided women with an opportunity to experiment with different artistic mediums through community artwork.

The event rotates between small localities in the Channel Country region, and is held at rodeo



grounds and racetracks. While this rotation presents logistical challenges, it allows for different populations in the region to be engaged, and without mobile reception, it enables women to escape the responsibilities and demands of everyday life. Fine dining is provided, and women are accommodated in tents should they not bring their own swag or gooseneck trailer.

Since 2012, the event has grown to a maximum capacity of 150 women, with the 2014 event held at Betoota, which is the smallest town in Australia, with an official population of zero. Since the inaugural event, a number of approaches have been made from people requesting information on how they could hold a similar event in their own communities.

In the inaugural year (2012), evaluation occurred to determine more effective processes, and improvements for sequential years. For the 2013 event, it occurred to the committee to examine the impact of Ladies Day on the lives of women in western Queensland, in a time of drought and dire situations. Hence, a small research project was designed for this purpose.

RESEARCH METHOD

This project employs qualitative research to examine the reach and impact of the Channel Country Ladies Day on the lives of women in remote outback Australia.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was utilised. In PAR, people concerned with a given issue adopt a lead role in producing and using knowledge. PAR is driven by participants, offering a democratic model for who can produce and own knowledge. It demands collaboration at every stage, and often results in some action or change for improving the identified issue (Paine et al., 2011). For the current project, as noted above, PAR was conducted via the majority of the 2013 Channel Country Ladies Day Committee members who are responsible for the organising of the event, consisting of eleven women of various ages and in varying employment and volunteer roles in differing geographical locations across western Queensland.

METHODS

Two methods were used for this research: the Partnerships Analysis Tool, to measure the effectiveness of the event's organization, and interviews, which explored the reach and impact of the event.

Partnerships Analysis Tool

The Partnerships Analysis Tool (PAT) was employed to examine the strength and effectiveness of partnerships developed and maintained for health outcomes. PAT is a Victoria Health tool that considers partnerships to be an important mechanism for building and sustaining capacity to promote health and prevent illness (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2011). The mapping component of the exercise, described more fully below, outlines a clear understanding of the range of purposes of collaborations through a visual interpretation of the nature and strength of the relationships. The PAT mapping exercise was conducted via teleconference with six participating committee members. The second component of PAT, the partnership checklist, was conducted with committee members to ascertain their understanding of the partnerships, in keeping with participatory action research (Lewis, 2005). Five committee members returned the PAT checklist.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted as trusted and personal engagements or conversations with a distinct purpose (Minichiello et al., 1995, cited in Shreval and Askew, 2012), as women shared their experiences of the Channel Country Ladies Day in a truly emotive and heartfelt manner. Eight women were interviewed. The sample size is considered robust for a qualitative study of this kind (Tracy, 2013). The interviews were completed by telephone in the two weeks following the event, and were up to one hour in duration.

The interviews sought to explore the impact of the weekend, as identified by the committee members who were able to observe the growth amongst the women around them. Questions were open-ended, in keeping with the exploratory nature of the research (Kilpatrick et al., 2009). The interviews allowed women to make sense of their experiences, critical to understanding the impact of drought (Pearce et al., 2010). Sherval and Askew (2011) argue that 'listening to lived experiences of those experiencing drought at a local and regional level is not only paramount to developing an appropriate government response, but also key to driving future adaption strategies in Australia and perhaps globally' (p. 362). Thematic analysis allowed for the extraction of patterns and themes present within the interviews (Tracy, 2013).

FINDINGS

PARTNERSHIPS ANALYSIS TOOL

The PAT refers to four types of partnerships in health promotion. On a continuum, networking involves the exchange of information for mutual benefit; co-ordinating involves the exchange of information and altering of activities for a common purpose; co-operating involves the sharing of resources; and collaborating, considered the highest level of partnership, allows a seamless delivery.

The Partnerships Analysis Tool mapping exercise (see Figure 2) shows the number of connections the Channel Country Ladies Day has formed with health service providers, regional arts organisations, state advocacy bodies, national foundations, local councils, and corporations and local businesses through events planning and execution, according to the committee members. The strongest partnerships were the collaborative relationships with the Royal Flying Doctor Service and Nockatunga Station, whose staff invested considerable time and commitment to achieve the desired purpose of the Channel Country Ladies Day. Co-operating partnerships were identified between the Channel Country Ladies Day and Red Ridge Interior Arts Queensland, Charleville Neighbourhood Centre, South West Hospital and Health Service, Frontier Services Outback Links, Santos, and other community and health-based organisations. Each of these listed organisations not only committed in-kind support and financial investment, but also developed a rapport with the committee over the course of the organisation of the Channel Country Ladies Day.

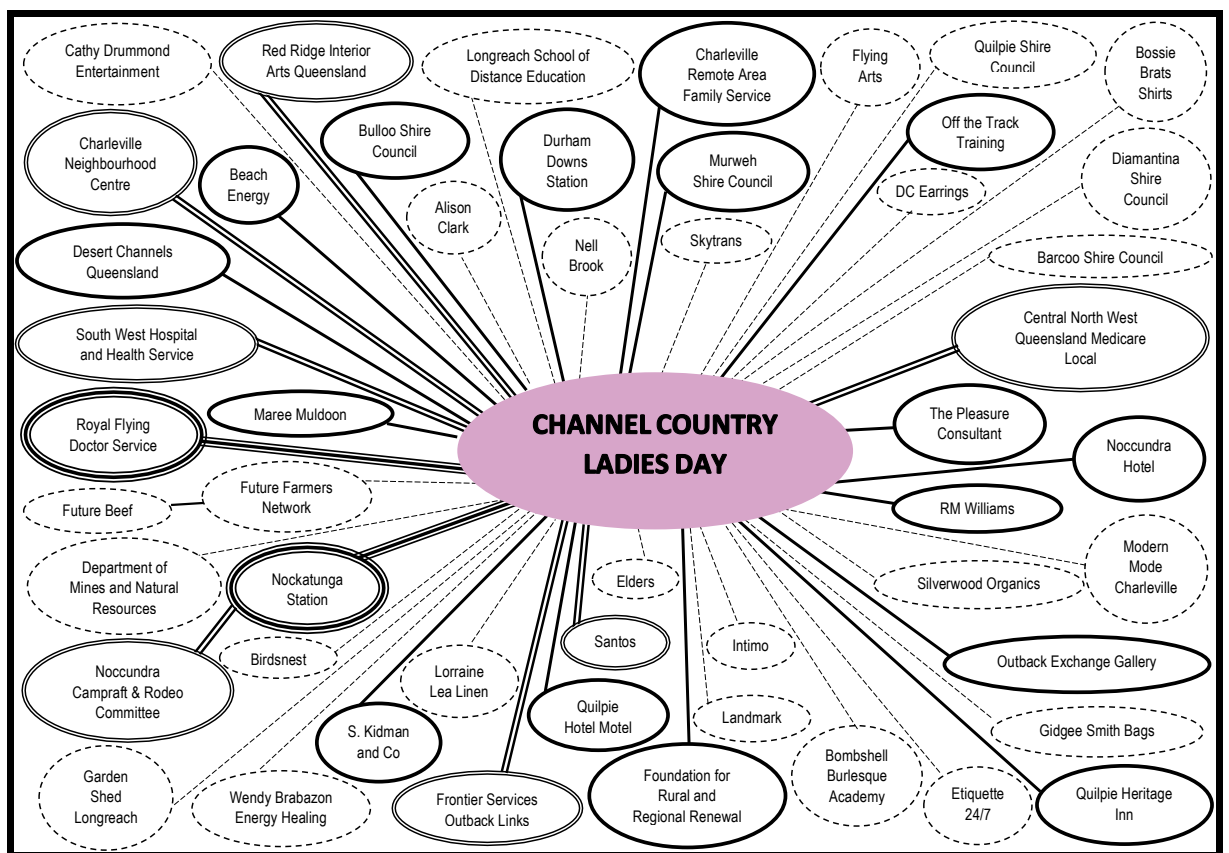



Figure 2. Partnerships Analysis Tool Mapping Exercise

Legend

Nature of relationship between partners

Networking
Coordinating	=====
Cooperating	=====
Collaborating	=====

The Partnerships Analysis Tool checklist examines the partnerships within the committee. The checklist data reveals a shared perception amongst committee members that very strong partnerships had



been established based on genuine collaboration. All committee members indicated a strong need for the partnerships, as well as a clear understanding of and common commitment to the purpose of the weekend. The committee perceived good relations between partners and clarity of responsibilities and decision making structures to ensure the partnerships worked. The committee members also described good planning for collaborative action for the running of Ladies Day, and the implementing of collaborative action, along with clear processes for reflecting on and continuing the partnerships. The lowest scoring field across all committee members was the barriers to partnerships; committee members cited a lack of formal structure for sharing information and resolving disputes. This identified problem has been addressed over the past two years as the committee has formalised its governance model, and additional structures and processes have been put in place to challenge what is sometimes a small town desire to avoid evaluation or conflict.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews were completed with eight members of the committee. By late 2013, the whole of the Channel Country was drought declared. In her interview, one mental health professional describes how drought impacts on all women in the region, including local business and townships. 'We say that drought impacts on those living on properties, but even the women in small communities it impacts on them as well. It is a definite atmosphere in the air when drought is around, and it impacts on businesses and other people.' This interviewee's comment sets the scene for the themes that emerged about growth amongst (and in spite of) despair during the interviews.

The Importance of a Temporary Reprieve

The weekend was described by women as more than just a good time. It was seen as an opportunity to discuss common issues, and as a temporary reprieve from the drought. For many women, the event was the first break in a long time. For one woman, it was her first break in seventeen years, and for a young mother, it was a break after six stressful weeks mustering. The latter stated, 'this weekend was exactly what I needed'. One woman reflected that 'it's so much more than a fun weekend, you can see them lift, some are putting themselves first for only once in their lives'. According to several interviewees, many of the women attending the event described themselves as emotionally recharged.

The weekend commenced with comedian Bev Killick. For many of the women, this event marked the first time they had laughed in a long time. 'It put a lot of people out of their comfort zone,' one of the committee women noted; 'Listening to the women laugh, you couldn't put a price on that. You don't hear that anywhere out here at the moment, laughing hysterically. It just rolled from then on in...' In reference to the comedian's jokes about forever cleaning the house after the children have been through, and about men's hands forever out for the grope, one health professional noted that 'The crudeness (of the comedian) was a release. They needed that escape from reality. The comedian just brought the realities home of what it is like to be a woman'.

Building Connectedness and Community


A recurring theme amongst the women was the inspiration and sense of connectedness they felt as a result of the weekend. One participant described the impact of the weekend thus: 'the sense of inspiration, deep inside of you, is overpowering. You can see it in so many women; all so positive, all smiles. It reaches them on a level you just can't explain'. A mental health professional described the notable connection between the women. 'The level of participation by the participants, the level of engagement; to see the women chatting while they were doing the silverwork or the millinery, there was a definite connection between women that attended this year.'

Importance of the Artsbreak Area

Women described how the weekend filled them with a sense of achievement and confidence to explore skills they had never tried, and sparked new interests. As one property manager metaphorically described, when she was watching women in the Artsbreak Area, 'the ones that [participated in the arts] climbed a few steps, climbed out of holes for a couple of days. [Getting rid of pressures] constantly weighing down on you. Skills up, empowerment that [can] carry [them] through hard times and drought.' Many interviewees noted that by instilling confidence in socially isolated rural and remote women, the weekend provided event participants with the opportunity to engage in self-expression, and the Artsbreak Area served to build the artistic capacity of the community.

Increasing Accessibility to Health Services

The event provided women with access to health professionals and knowledge regarding health services and healthcare. One health professional described how 'there were a lot of questions of the resources, a lot of



people weren't aware of the latest dietary guidelines; they weren't aware of the latest health messages that women get a lot in the major urban areas. The fact they could ask doctors questions, they could get pap smears'. The health professionals described participating alongside their clients in the weekend's activities as an opportunity to connect with their clients. 'It breaks down barriers of professionals and clients. It really makes you on that same level. Joining in really helped when people wanted to ask questions.'

Relationship to Hardship

Hardship was a recurring theme for all the women interviewed. As noted by a mental health professional, many women are in difficult circumstances: 'I'm sure the decision to attend wasn't taken lightly by any of the women, and required great sacrifices from those at home that continued with the mundane tasks.' She adds,

I just hope when women get home the spark stays there. I'd like to think it is going to be very sustainable. I think the memories that they created that weekend will carry them through the coming months. We hope that the rains will come, and I don't think the memories will diminish with the rain. The women learnt a lot about themselves and generally, how important it is to treat themselves and have a break.

The event 'strengthens them, and the resolve to get on with what they have to face when they get home'. One health professional described the weekend as an opportunity for women to 'come, enjoy themselves, and have a release from the pressures of everyday life'.

Driven by a Shared Purpose

A shared passion and purpose was evident in the commitment of the committee members driving the project. As one committee member put it: 'even those that are doing it as part of work would have a blurry line with it being work or personal because of that commitment to and passion about the idea behind it all.' Behind each of the women on the committee is a sincere passion for supporting rural women to achieve their greatest potential, through sharing and gathering.

Prior to the event, many of the committee members had not met face to face. Despite the challenges of planning and executing an event without meeting physically, one committee member described it as a 'special, encouraging weekend. Friends came in with us and assisted us in doing it'. One health professional stated that there is 'no faltering in level of commitment – everyone wants to see something like this for women out here.'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This report highlights the need for a more comprehensive evaluation framework at future Channel Country Ladies Day projects. Interviewing and surveying event participants both prior to and after a given event would provide more substantial evidence about the outcomes and impacts on the women attending. It would also be useful at future events to allow for ongoing evaluation throughout the Ladies Day weekend, through a whiteboard or butchers paper on which women could record their reflections on the event.

Considering the growth of the event, and its significantly increasing budget year on year, this project points to the need to maintain formalized structures within the committee, with defined roles and responsibilities. Such formalisation will assist in a more equal sharing of responsibilities amongst committee members, and allow for clearer processes for conflict resolution.

There is potential for the Channel Country Ladies Day to become a model for other rural and remote communities to address social and emotional wellbeing. The numerous approaches of communities interested in holding a Channel Country Ladies Day-type event reveals the considerable need that exists in remote areas to support women. Communities could work to a size that is appropriate for their capacity, and could adapt the content to suit their needs. Thus, the Channel Country Ladies Day concept could be a model for addressing drought and environmental disasters and building the capacity of rural and remote communities via a community directed and owned approach.

At the heart of community development is community ownership and involvement, whereby the community makes and implements decisions. The community's initiative and leadership is the source of change (Cavaye, 2006). The success of the Ladies Day lies in the fact it has always been an initiative of women in the Channel Country; it has been developed and implemented by women of the Channel Country, and only assisted by outside supporters. As Cavaye notes, the passion and enthusiasm of local people drives action; it is their belief, motivation and commitment that fuels change. The committee has assisted in building motivation and community capacity through participation and active involvement in decision-making and implementation. In line with Cavaye's community development framework, external facilitators were invited in to work with rural communities, including sponsors, organisations, speakers and presenters. At the heart of



the event is the decision to hold it in a remote location that is in a relaxed and familiar setting, and allows women to celebrate their identity as rural women without having to travel to the city (Cock, 2007).

The very nature of the event in the remote, dusty location of the racetrack, which is marked by weather extremes, cements the women's lives as at the beck and call of Mother Nature in this arid part of Australia. Women are enlightened as they explore the inextricable links between their own wellbeing and the land, and the importance of nourishing both in order to survive, especially at a time of drought (Kingsley et al., 2009). The landscape gives space to value and appreciate nature, with heightened ecological consciousness (Coates, 2003). Informed by the land, the event celebrates women of the outback's ecological consciousness and equips women with skills for enhanced ecological literacy in our contemporary and changing world (Coates and Gray, 2012). Through the arts, women were able to explore their connection with nature. A mosaic that was created depicted the desert channels that run through the Channel Country, which not only define the Channel Country landscape, but also run deeply through each woman in the area. For another arts project, women dragged scrap metal from locations on their property, and together with the assistance of a welder and sculpture artist, it was shaped into a beautiful emu that is now a piece of community art. In addition, by bringing together leaders in sustainable agriculture to engage and interact with the women through the stories they told about bringing family up on the land, we are actively contributing to a community that is skilled and confident in caring for our landscape (Cock, 2007).

The Channel Country Ladies Day fosters leadership, entrepreneurship and altruism (Cavaye, 2006). Through the committee, the event developed the leadership and skills of regional people who took on leadership roles within their communities and contributed to the creation of a regional event that celebrates their identity as rural women. The Ladies Day committee actively engaged in community development, reaching a decision to initiate a social action process to change their economic, social, cultural and environmental situation (Christenson et. al., 1989, cited in Cavaye, 2001). By working as a collective, and having ownership over the event, women were actively involved in shifting their social and emotional wellbeing. The high level of trust and existing engagement with the host property, Nockatunga Station, enabled the development of the concept; thus, our community development process rested on interaction between people and joint action, or collective agency, rather than individual activity (Flora and Flora, 1993, cited in Cavaye, 2006).

Cavaye (2006) notes that attitudes and networks are just as important as material outcomes in community development (see also Payne, 2005). For many of the women who attended, the event transformed the manner in which they are able to interpret their experiences, and offered an opportunity for community rethinking about self and being. Since the first event, women have approached the researcher, describing how the event has provoked the questions 'I wonder what I'm doing with my life. What am I passionate about?'. The event also encouraged the exploring and advancing of talent, and developed the skills of regional people through access to artistic experimentation in a region otherwise devoid of such experiences. It encouraged collaboration of women in the region, the sharing and development of community ideas, the cementing of community spirit, and the celebration of female identity. The event engendered the development of a stronger sense of community-celebrated community spirit (Cavaye, 2001). Through the creation of a community canvas, community mosaic and sculpture piece, the event served to develop community ideas through collaborative works of art.

The Channel Country Ladies Day has become a sought after meeting point to indulge and savour company and community. From the Nockatunga racetrack location, it reconfirms the women's identity that is so intertwined with the desert landscape. From this position, women are able to experiment, create, inspire and connect.

These findings are provided in the hope that other communities enduring stress may be assisted by similar activities and events. The Channel Country Ladies Day possibly offers a model from which other remote communities could work to secure the future sustainability of healthy bodies, healthy minds, healthy communities and a healthy landscape. And it is this that, as Kahn (2010) argues, would serve well for future social work education – ecopedagogy that synthesises traditions of ecoliteracy and grass roots social research (cited in Jones, 2011).



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