

Engaging communities with catchment thinking in an urban context

Project Note

A summary of findings from the collaborative research project:

Project 5.4
Community participation in waterway protection and restoration (sub-project 1)

Community engagement is pivotal to the success of integrated urban water management and in achieving the vision for Melbourne as a water sensitive city. Integrated urban water management is grounded in an understanding of the built environment as a catchment, which suggests new priorities, practices, and responsibilities for urban residents.

Community engagement with 'catchment thinking' in urban contexts is essential to:

- 1) furthering community support for investment in sustainable water management in their local neighbourhoods
- 2) aligning practices in households and neighbourhoods with the objectives of integrated urban water management.

Research objectives

This pilot research project explored the potential for improving community engagement with the built environment as an urban catchment, to drive practices related to integrated water management that support healthier urban waterways. The research investigated the challenges for urban residents in understanding, experiencing and managing the urban environment as a catchment.

The following research objectives were addressed through a study of residents of the City of Moreland, a municipality that is active in urban water management, with high levels of population growth and urban densification:

- To investigate the ways in which urban residents understand water in the urban landscape

- To investigate the ways in which urban residents experience and manage water in the home and their neighbourhood
- To identify strategies for making the built environment more 'legible' and 'liveable' for residents as an urban catchment

Research method

Six focus groups were conducted with community groups based in the City of Moreland, including a: climate activist group; university student group; community gardening group; waterways volunteer group; a neighbourhood walking group, and a senior citizens group.

The resulting sample of 34 residents included participants of differing household arrangement, type of residence, neighbourhood, age, ethnicity, and engagement with environmental and water issues.

Transcripts of the recorded discussions, as well as drawings and maps created in the focus groups, were coded using the software nVivo to identify key themes and patterns.

Key findings and implications

The results highlighted the following four issues for community engagement.

1. Disconnection between residents' practices and the health of waterways

Despite participants generally evidencing a commitment to 'good' water practices around their homes and neighbourhoods, and a commitment to healthier waterways,

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Authors:
Stephanie Lavau

they did not often express these elements as connected. For example, water saving practices around their homes were primarily justified as a response to resource scarcity, rather than being linked to river health outcomes. The passage of stormwater through their neighbourhood was infrequently remarked, and was only occasionally linked to the home or local waterways.

This may mean that significant capacity for change in practices within the home and the neighbourhood remains to be activated, and that the benefits of council interventions to 'lead by example' may go unrecognised and unnoticed.

2. Restriction in understanding the role of urban residents in urban water management

Participants' understanding of their household contribution to urban water management was generally restricted to water saving. Their sense of responsibility for urban water management was often confined to the home, with many participants expressing relatively little sense of obligation beyond their front gate and into their local neighbourhood. There are opportunities here for extending residents' understanding of the potential roles of households in urban water management, so that they align with the kinds of co-management arrangements often signalled in strategies for integrated urban water management.

3. Saturation of capacity for contributing to urban water management

Within this framing of their role as water saving, participants often felt they had reached full capacity for change within their households. This sense of saturation was variously due to: having sufficient storage to meet their re-purposed water use; being unable to install or retrofit further infrastructure for water harvesting due to ownership or physical constraints; having exhausted avenues for water use efficiencies around the home and garden; or having

more pressing environmental priorities during a period of relative water abundance.

This strong sense of saturation will be a challenge for efforts to extend the contribution of residents to urban water management, both within their home and within their neighbourhood.

4. Drainage of good will

Some participants expressed a draining of good will in relation to their support for healthier urban waterways, when their efforts were ignored or countered by others. For example, feelings of frustration and futility were described when: their reporting of pollution or wasteful water use did not seemingly result in action; their efforts to collect litter from streets was overwhelmed by the volume of litter on the streets following the weekly garbage collection; or water was observed flooding from faulty infrastructure owned by key actors in water management.

In the context of a municipality that aspires to 'lead by example', this approach could be more effectively extended from modelling technologies to modelling behaviours, and from municipal agencies through to partner organisations.

