



Bushcare Training Review: Report to the Sydney Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority

Prepared by Rosanna Luca

Executive Summary

This report was prepared for the Sydney Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority (CMA). It collates the results from a review conducted about the existing training provisions and the current requirements of volunteers who undertake the outdoor environmental work across Sydney, generally known as “Bushcare”.¹

The review did not cover other programs involving natural resource training such as National Green Jobs Corps, Land Alive or other environmental work experience programs. It was conducted during the period December 2010 to March 2011.

The aim of this review was to provide the Sydney Metropolitan CMA with:

- A summary of what training is currently offered to Bushcare volunteers (courses and workshops delivered in-house or through TAFE or by private training consultants and community based organisations)
- An indication of gaps in skills and awareness among Bushcare volunteers
- Recommendations for future training opportunities to address gaps and needs.

The review involved various steps including a search of local council websites, an email survey, phone surveys, meetings, two focus groups and a group discussion at the March 2011 meeting of the Volunteer Co-ordinators Network.

In total, 125 people provided direct feedback to the surveys, meetings and focus groups. This included 90 Bushcare volunteers, as well as Bushcare co-ordinators (from 20 local council and national parks organisations), private training consultants, TAFE teachers and Sydney Metropolitan CMA community support staff.

Despite the limited timeframe of the project, a wide variety of people were consulted and the feedback received reflects the diversity in the needs of the organisations involved and their volunteers.

This diversity is attributed to many factors including:

- Different levels of resources within the organisations that manage volunteers
- Varying levels of internal support for Bushcare across organisations
- Diverse organisational policies for whether to make Bushcare training compulsory, the accepted minimum level of training etc
- Different training needs of volunteers based how long they have been in Bushcare, how often they work with a supervisor and their knowledge gained so far

¹ See “Environmental Volunteering in the Sydney region 2009”, a brochure published by Sydney Metropolitan CMA, (June 2010) showing the scope of current Bushcare activities in Sydney.

- Diversity of landscapes and natural area restoration contexts where the volunteers are working.

Whilst there was a diversity of responses, some consistent messages came through the survey responses. The main findings from the research and survey responses have formulated the recommendations to the Sydney Metropolitan CMA. Although the focus of the study was in Sydney, outcomes are likely to also be relevant to other bushcare programs outside the metropolitan area.

The main findings are summarised below.

- Because the needs of organisations and volunteers are so diverse, there can be no one fixed or standard generic model for Bushcare training across the Sydney region or beyond. Most of the current training courses reviewed are well designed and have a good reputation overall. They are delivered in different ways and for different purposes.
- Rather than standardised training and having volunteers doing the same courses, what is needed is an accepted standard or consensus across the organisations about the minimum levels of competence required by Bushcare volunteers. There can be different ways to achieve this minimum level of competence ranging from accredited courses, in-house courses and on-site training.
- The training that happens on the Bushcare site is very important (probably the most important aspect of training). For many volunteers it is the only training they receive. Not all volunteers have the time or inclination to do extra courses or additional reading or viewing of training materials. There seems to be no consistency in the way volunteers are being taught and skilled on-site. Very few council or national park organisations have a structured on-site training program, which allows them to monitor and assess the skill levels being obtained by the volunteers over time, (although this is usually a key aspect of trainee and work experience programs).
- Good supervision and training of volunteers on-site is a “learn by doing” exercise, which allows volunteers to build competence (and their confidence) over a period of time. Many of these skills and competencies cannot be learnt in a one-day training course. Supervisors have a very important role in training volunteers by demonstrating techniques, skills, doing refresher training and reinforcing broader concepts (such as habitat protection and the “bigger picture” of why we are doing Bushcare?).
- A broad range of training and skilling opportunities needs to be offered. There are the volunteers who just want to show up to work on the day, learning “on the job”. There are other volunteers who want to do extra training courses and learn new information. Training can be done using a variety of methods ranging from formal courses, hands-on workshops, training videos and demonstrations, walks and talks, and opportunities for volunteers to exchange technical information (eg bus tours to different Bushcare sites). A variety of options would help get information and the key messages across to as many people as possible. A variety of choices also helps meet the needs of volunteers who learn in different ways and who vary in age, levels of technical skill and experience, English literacy skills and availability of time.
- Training is often seen as a linear process. Volunteers complete one level of training and are then encouraged to proceed to the next level (ie the “advanced” level course or a specialised topic.) Volunteers usually work once or twice a month for a few hours at a

time. Often, refresher training is what is needed the most, to brush up on skills or put into practice the information learnt at a training course.

- None of the volunteer survey responses indicated that doing “accredited” training is more important to them, or a preference to other types of training. Most volunteers seem to just want to know what to do, how to do it, why they are doing it and get on with the job. For most, training that is enjoyable, practical and relevant for their Bushcare site is more important than obtaining a qualification. For organisations, costs and the nature of the content, such that it meets their internal standards, are key requirements.
- There are a range of accredited training opportunities for Bushcare volunteers currently being offered in Sydney. Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE, Ryde, delivers an introductory Bushcare one day course with a Statement of Attainment and can deliver other customised training on request. Volunteers can enroll into a TAFE Certificate II or III course that teaches bush regeneration skills and there are various delivery models including a mix of face-to-face home-based study and/or on-site assessment depending on the TAFE Institute involved.
- A gap that was consistently identified by TAFE teachers, private training consultants, Bushcare co-ordinators and experienced Bushcare volunteers is that many volunteers do not have a broad knowledge and understanding of “the bigger picture” of Bushcare – of ecosystem management and biodiversity. Concerns were expressed about volunteers who can (unknowingly) do more harm than good by the mass clearing of weeds and destruction of habitat.

From these main findings, a series of recommendations has been provided to the Sydney Metropolitan CMA:

- Nurture an awareness and mind set among volunteers about the “big picture”, the Sydney or Australia-wide context and why are we doing Bushcare. A series of innovative pilot workshops could be developed by the CMA to provide volunteers with a sense of the bigger picture of Bushcare, covering broader issues such as habitat, biodiversity protection and cultural heritage. A workshop template could also be developed, encouraging other organisations to deliver similar workshops to volunteers in the future.
- Explore training and upskilling opportunities for the supervisors who work directly with Bushcare volunteers. Although the focus of this research was on the training needs of volunteers, the important role of Bushcare supervisors became very clear. Supervisors require a broad range of technical and people skills in order to effectively work with, motivate and train volunteers. There could be opportunities for grant funding or pooling of financial resources (councils and national parks) to develop a professional development program for Bushcare supervisors working across Sydney.
- Explore the range of options to monitor, assess and recognise the skills acquired by Bushcare volunteers while working on site. This could involve a structured system used in-house (such as a supervisor’s monthly/yearly checklist) to ensure a range of basic skills and concepts are taught and reinforced over a period of time. These could be linked to units of competency in suitable courses in arrangement with accredited training providers such as TAFE, if organisations wanted to pursue accredited outcomes for their volunteers.
- Many councils in Sydney already work together, sharing the costs and organisation of training opportunities for Bushcare volunteers. The volunteers who responded to the surveys identified many gaps in skills and knowledge. The summarised list of gaps identified by volunteers may provide the Bushcare co-ordinators and supervisors with

inspiration for new training opportunities (formal or informal) as well as enhancing existing ones.

- Other resources such as the www.bushcare.org.au website and a publicised list of private training consultants could also be used to assist the local councils and national park organisations in continuing to provide a broad range of training opportunities, sharing materials and developing new ideas.

The term “training” has been used loosely in this research, and includes formal courses, informal workshops, walks/talks, field days, site tours and on site training – any activity that is held with the intention of building the knowledge and skills of Bushcare volunteers. Resources and training policies vary within the organisations. The needs and level of interest for doing extra training also varies among volunteers.

Good on-site supervision, a broad range of opportunities and the sharing of training resources will all assist towards meeting the diverse needs of many Bushcare volunteers working across the Sydney region.

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For further information or to obtain a copy of the full report please contact the Sydney Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority on 02 9895 7898 or email judy.christie@cma.nsw.gov.au