

Patawalonga Creek Steering Committee: Strength In Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The Patawalonga Creek Steering Committee is a group of stakeholders who regularly support and care for Patawalonga Creek. This small reach of creek, on Adelaide Airport land, is the largest remnant of the *Reedbeds* wetlands. With a rare stand of *Melaleuca halmaturorum*, the area is threatened by pest plants and animals, vandalism, sedimentation and stormwater. The Steering Committee grew from the commitment of the local Friends group and Adelaide Airport staff. Membership now encompasses Our Patch (Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges NRM Board), Urban Forest Million Trees Program (Dept. for Environment and Heritage) and Conservation Volunteers Australia, with Delta Environmental Consulting coordinating the Action Plan. The committee meets bi-annually. Waterwatch Central Adelaide was invited to join in 2005 and our strengths in engagement and education were matched to the public awareness goal of the plan. We have linked local schools to the site through Schools Tree Day, community service projects, mentoring, student-to-student learning and publication of a promotional brochure. The strength of the committee includes the facilitation role of the independent consultants, the group's input into key documents such as the Management and Revegetation Plans and the Provenance Guidelines, a small but secure budget from the Adelaide Airport Environment Manager and the complementary skills of the stakeholders. These factors are particularly important for the sustainability of the project, given most of the organisations involved have had one to three changeovers in staff over the last decade.

PATAWALONGA CREEK

Patawalonga Creek is a semi-natural creek in the Adelaide suburb of West Beach. It sits west of the Adelaide Airport, within an area of land leased from the Commonwealth Government (Department of Transport and Regional Services) by Adelaide Airport Ltd (AAL). The current operators have had control of the site since privatisation in 1998 [1].

It is an unusual area because the Creek has not been channelised, like most others nearby, for stormwater drainage. Previously an inter-tidal mixing zone, modifications to tidal and storm water flows in the downstream Patawalonga Basin and the adjacent Golf Course have resulted in a freshwater system overlying stranded estuarine soils [1]. The site is also significant because it contains the largest remnant of the Swamp paperbark (*Melaleuca halmaturorum*) vegetation association in the Adelaide metropolitan area. It was part of the extensive freshwater swamps known as the Reedbeds, which stretched for kilometers behind sand dune systems west of the city, and which have been filled and built on [2]. Local residents and organizations have taken a keen interest in preserving and restoring this unique habitat.

In their 2004 Environment Strategy, AAL declared a nominal 30m riparian buffer zone along the course of the creek and the creek itself as a conservation zone [1]. Under *The Airports (Environment Protection) Regulations 1997* as well as the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and associated policies, AAL is required to protect the site [3,4]. The site is surrounded by cyclone fencing to prevent vandalism and there is minimal signage.

PATAWALONGA CREEK STEERING COMMITTEE

Formation Of The Steering Committee

The formation of the Friends of Patawalonga Creek in 1998 preceded the Steering Committee by a year. The Friends worked with external consultants to develop the first draft action plan for the site in August 1999 [5]. In December 1999, the Patawalonga Creek Steering Committee was formed to assist the AAL Environmental Manager in the development of the *Remnant Patawalonga Creek Management Plan* which was completed in May 2001 [1].

In 2004, Delta Consulting, an independent South Australian consulting business, was contracted to develop a new Action Plan. This plan replaced the existing draft, and was based on all existing documentation. Its recommendations included new recommendations from consultation with stakeholders, and incorporated stakeholder responsibilities and priorities. Prior to this, many people had been involved at the site and moved on, leading to some loss of documentation and a failure to deliver on some actions [1].

As part of the 2004 consultation, several stakeholders put forth the recommendation that a part-time consultant be engaged to coordinate the day-to-day management of Patawalonga Creek, facilitate meetings of the Steering Committee and apply for funding under the direction of AAL [1]. In late 2004, Delta Consulting was engaged by AAL to facilitate the Action Plan. This equates to about 8 hours a month. The legislation and policies that govern the management of the site are shown in Appendix 1.

How The Steering Committee Currently Works

The Patawalonga Creek Steering Committee meets bi-annually, chaired by Delta Consulting and hosted by AAL. These meetings take place at 5:30pm or later so that volunteers who work full time can attend and dinner is provided. Sub-groups meet at other times to discuss pertinent issues such as plant orders for revegetation.

The Steering Committee is involved in a consultation process for the development of all plans for the site, with AAL having ultimate responsibility for their implementation. Restoration of the site is not the primary objective of AAL, so external funding is required for these activities. The group takes responsibility for identifying or supplying grant money and training opportunities for the group. The group is guided by the Management Plan, see Appendix 2, and the Action Plan, as well as a range of accompanying plans such as the Revegetation Plan [6] and Provenance Guidelines [7].

An email list is maintained by Delta Consulting and used to keep all Steering Committee members informed of all decisions and questions about the site, as well as other stakeholders such as neighbouring tenants on AAL land. A Google Calendar of events is updated with site works and meeting dates.

Steering Committee Members

The success of the Steering Committee lies in the diversity of its membership. The group is made up of volunteers and paid staff of a range of organisations that regularly support and care for Patawalonga Creek. All work towards the following vision: "To protect and enhance a natural heritage area within metropolitan Adelaide to provide habitat for native species and for the education and enjoyment of the community of today and tomorrow." Figure 1 outlines the involvement and roles of the current Steering Committee.

Adelaide Airport Ltd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landholder • Day-to-day management of the site and infrastructure • Provide water tanker for Tree Days • Work with Council on stormwater issues • Maintain permits for seed collection • Control access through key provision • Technical expertise for on-ground works • Maintain nursery at the Airport • Seeking further financial support through grants • Contracting CVA on a semi-commercial basis 1-2 days per month
Friends of Patawalonga Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weeding/slashing/poisoning/planting working bees (one per month and opportunistic) • Coordinate National Tree Day • Plant propagation and seed collection • Nursery re-establishment and maintenance • Technical advice to Steering Committee • Soil sampling • Fauna surveys • Water quality monitoring through Waterwatch since 2004 • Newsletter and promotion of group • Fundraising • Involvement of Torrens Valley TAFE students in research projects on site
Delta Environmental Consulting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contracted to facilitate the Action Plan (76 hrs/year) • Contracted to prepare other plans and guidelines for the site
Our Patch (Adelaide & Mt Lofty Ranges NRM Board)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide part of plant order for Tree Days • Identify other grants and assist with application • Technical expertise for on-ground works • Assistance with Tree Day coordination • Allocate 1-2 days per year of funding for CVA
Urban Forest Million Trees Program (Dept. for Environment and Heritage)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for plants and CVA through grant system • Technical expertise for on-ground works • Assistance with Tree Day activities
Conservation Volunteers Australia	Contracted to provide a team leader and crew of 6 volunteers, 1-2 days per month for weeding, poisoning, slashing, site preparation for Tree Days, planting, installing infrastructure eg gauging points, seed collection, propagation and weeding of nursery plants, rescue of injured wildlife, monitoring leaf litter and plant survival rates
Waterwatch Central Adelaide (AMLR NRMB & KESAB environmental solutions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support water quality monitoring through equipment, QA/QC • Mentor Immanuel College students • Grant funding for small projects • Coordinate Schools Tree Day • Facilitate local school involvement at site

Figure 1. Roles and responsibilities of current Patawalonga Creek Steering Committee [3,4,8,9].

THE ROLE OF WATERWATCH

How Waterwatch Became Involved

Waterwatch and the Friends of Patawalonga Creek had developed a relationship in May 2004 when we started supporting them to monitor the water quality in the Creek. Delta Consulting was pivotal because at the time they were developing an Estuarine Monitoring Manual for Waterwatch and writing the Action Plan for Patawalonga Creek, which referenced the Manual's techniques.

In January 2005, I was invited as the local Waterwatch coordinator, to attend the first Delta chaired Steering Committee Meeting. The Action Plan was discussed in detail and I identified several actions that Waterwatch could contribute to:

- Raise public awareness of the historical, ecological, hydrological and geological attributes of Patawalonga Creek
- Encourage secondary schools, University and TAFE involvement in monitoring and research requirements for the site
- Monitor and document changes in water quality, physical parameters and vegetation structure using Waterwatch estuarine guidelines [1].

After the meeting Delta arranged another meeting with me to discuss the details of how Waterwatch could increase school participation at the site. I suggested Schools Tree Day, given the Friends group had already been running a successful National Tree Day at the site for some time. There was also the option of some of the local schools within walking distance being interested in more regular involvement at the site.

Local School Partnerships

Just after this meeting, a teacher from a local school, Immanuel College, contacted Waterwatch to see if there were any on-ground projects their Yr 9 Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) group could become involved in. I suggested Patawalonga Creek as a good option to meet the school's objectives of community service. A meeting was arranged with Delta to examine the Action Plan and a program of activities was drafted up to run over Term 2 and 3. Schools Tree Day falls at the beginning of Term 3, so preparation for this formed the first part of the program.

Delta and I took the students on a guided tour of the site and practiced aquatic invertebrate sampling and identification, then I ran a session with them on working with school groups, and in their allocated class time they develop two mini-tours based on the swamp paperbarks and the freshwater life. We promoted Schools Tree Day through our newsletter, developed the timetable for the day and chaired meetings with the on-ground project officers who were responsible for coordinating the planting activity on the day.

In the first week of Term 3, I went to each participating school and gave a short presentation to the participating classes about the significance of the Tree Day site and what we would be doing. On the day I was site coordinator and my education officers and some of the GATE students assisted with the planting, while the other GATE students worked in small groups to take 10-15 students at a time on the mini-tours. The students enjoyed the day and were keen to follow up, and they identified from the Action Plan that one of the project aims was to develop signage at the site, and that they could fundraise and help with the sign development. Through lolly sales they raised \$360 in two months. Several Steering Committee members pledged to

match that dollar for dollar. Over the remainder of the term the GATE group monitored water quality and surveyed wildlife independently as the teacher was given a key.

In 2006 the GATE group wanted to be involved again, with some students from the previous year acting as mentors to new students. The program was improved by condensing it down to one term, to culminate in the Tree Day event. As well as undertaking monitoring activities, the students also worked on layout designs for the signage. This being a longer term project, I thought a promotional flyer might be a more immediate project for the students to develop, and I applied through the Local Council for an Environmental Grant to cover printing costs. The application was successful but too late for the 2006 GATE cohort to work on. After Tree Day 2006, one of the Immanuel College teachers investigated offering Patawalonga Creek as an elective SOCE subject with dedicated classroom time, but they did not have the numbers in 2007 to run it.

In 2007 the GATE students spent most of their time in Term 2 developing the promotional flyer, *Our Unique Patawalonga*, with assistance from Waterwatch, and proofing by the Steering Committee. The teacher thought a better use of the grant money would be to put it towards engaging a graphic designer to work with the students and increase their skills. The initial print run, for delivery to all students and members of the public involved in Tree Day 2007, was done in-house by Waterwatch. We are investigating a small community grant from the Adelaide & Mt Lofty Ranges NRM Board for a professional print run that can be distributed to local libraries and community centres as well as letterboxing in streets adjacent to the site. The flyer is now linked to the AAL and local council web site.

All schools that participated in Schools Tree Day were interested in visiting the site later in the year to check on their plants, which were marked with different coloured tape. The nearest school, West Beach Primary, indicated they would like to have some long term involvement at the site, as there were good links to be made between their school's native garden and the species they were planting at the site.

Having read about the Tree Day activity in the Waterwatch newsletter, a local high school teacher contacted me to try and find a hands-on community project that his Community Service students could be involved in. I made contact with the Friends of Patawalonga Creek and they worked together to plan a maintenance program at the site over four days, with 2 hour sessions at a time with 20 Yr 9 students. Weeding doesn't interest most people, but after the students saw a baby sleepy lizard and a baby tortoise they became more engaged, and on the second day they were able to do some planting as well. The teacher is keen to continue contributing to the project.

PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS

There are multiple benefits to our involvement in the Steering Committee:

- Waterwatch can link local schools to this community project, whose hands-on aspects are particularly appealing for linking learning to action
- The education and engagement focus of Waterwatch is complementary to the skill set of the Steering Committee and allows the group to meet more of their Actions
- The Friends group and the Steering Committee get free (student) labour which means an additional 2000 plants per year, and some maintenance work that doesn't need to be budgeted for
- The project site can get wider promotion through the Schools Tree Day event, web site, promotional flyer and the Waterwatch officers

- Waterwatch can use its network to promote the work of the Steering Committee – eg informing a local council officer about the Friends' fauna survey which lead to the inclusion of the findings in council's State of Environment Report.

THE STEERING COMMITTEE MODEL

Strengths

The continued facilitation of the Action Plan by Delta Consulting has been a great strength of the Steering Committee model. Due to the legislative requirements placed on AAL to protect the site, the Environmental Management team has not had any problems budgeting for the project, and they feel they get very good value for their investment [4]. With this successful facilitation, all stakeholders have had input into the development of the suite of plans and strategies that are guiding the group, so there is ownership and agreement over their final forms. There is very specific detail about the long term goals of the Committee and how they will be achieved, eg the Provenance Guidelines and Revegetation Plan [6,7].

With the range of organisations involved, the work load is spread well and the membership of the committee has remained stable for the last five years. There are a range of organisations that deal with revegetation issues and it is good to have the breadth of experience in this area, rather than it falling on one person. All documents are widely distributed and easily accessible, timelines for their review are managed by an 'independent' group, and communication is very open. In order to maintain a high degree of care and awareness of what exists on site and the strategies being employed, an induction process will be developed for all volunteers working on the site.

Weaknesses

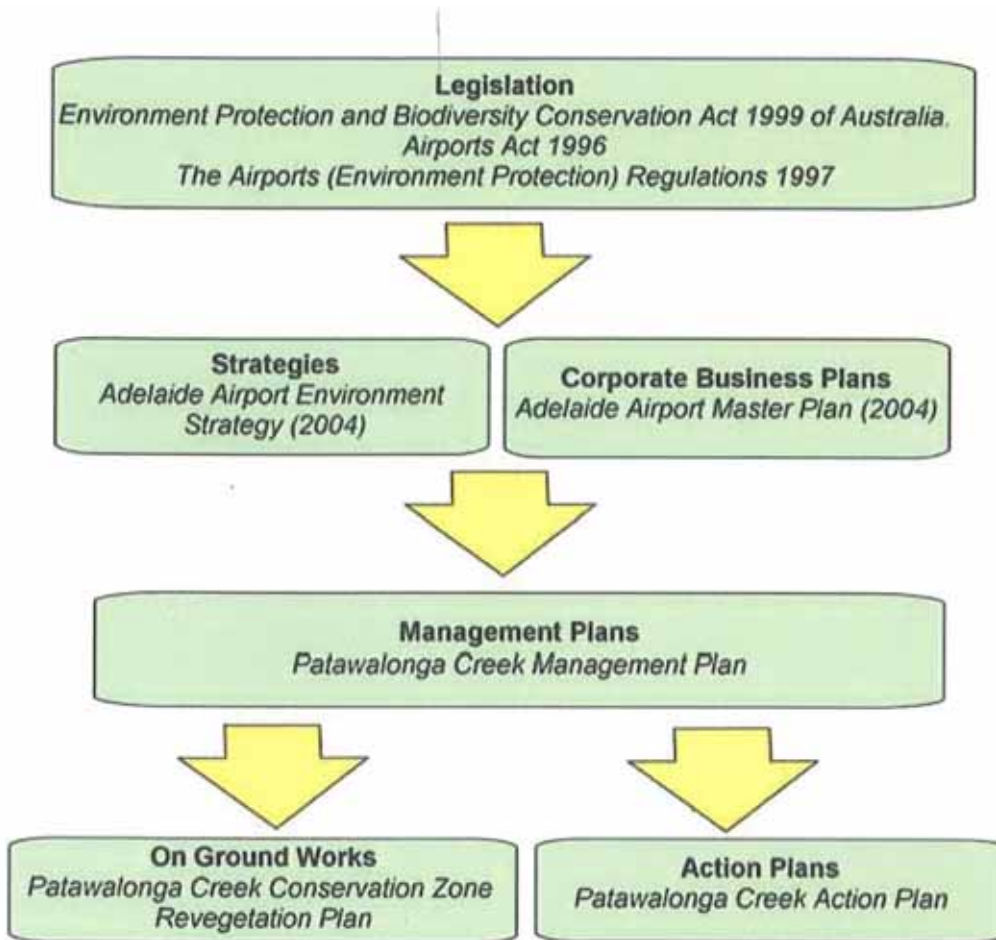
One of the biggest weaknesses of the Steering Committee is high project officer turnover. This is not due to the model, but rather the nature of short term contracts in the environmental field. Since its formation in 1999, there have been 11 turn-overs of project officers involved in the Committee, and others who are no longer involved. For this reason, it is imperative that excellent records are kept and successive officers are properly briefed.

A weakness in the model which is difficult to control is that nobody, other than AAL and the organisations they engage, has any specific responsibility to fulfil their responsibilities as outlined in the Action Plan. For project officers it falls within the general job description or program aims, but involvement with the Committee rests on their goodwill, interest and funding availability.

The Future

The Steering Committee is going strong, having just completed the consultation phase for the Revegetation Plan, and the next iteration of the Management Plan, which has a life of 8-10 years. As the major stakeholder, the benefits to AAL go beyond meeting their legislative requirements. They value the community benefits such as National Tree Day, and the rise of corporate volunteering is resulting in more requests from large groups to assist the Airport with on-ground projects. The Steering Committee is also investigating another organisation to take on the role of nursery coordinator because it has recognised that this requires a suite of skills, accreditation and time that the group doesn't currently have.

Appendix 1. Legislation and policies governing the management of Patawalonga Creek [3].



Appendix 2. Main objectives of the current draft Patawalonga Creek Conservation Zone Management Plan [3]

1. Preservation and enhancement of existing habitats using the weed control and revegetation strategies provided on request to accompany this Management Plan and the Provenance Guidelines for Patawalonga Creek, and managing visitor impact.
2. Provide adequate habitat by maintaining and enhancing vegetation associations currently on site and reducing pollutants entering the site via stormwater.
3. To protect and enhance existing and planted native species through regular weed control.
4. Minimise negative impacts of non-native fauna on the site.
5. To improve current and long term environmental health of the Conservation Zone by preventing pollution entering Patawalonga Creek.
6. Reduce impacts of adjoining land use through the creation of a buffer zone and consultation with neighbours and government agencies.
7. Facilitate visitor appreciation and understanding of the site, by communicating its local cultural significance.
8. Minimise detrimental visitor impacts to the site by limiting or controlling visitor access and promoting awareness and understanding of the site's significance.
9. Improve current and long term environmental health of the Conservation Zone through earthworks and engineering.
10. Keep stakeholders in touch and updated with site events and information.
11. Promote awareness of and obtain data for Patawalonga Creek by utilising the site for training and education.
12. Carry out site maintenance and preparation through the semi-commercial use of volunteers.
13. Facilitate better protection of the site through policy and funding agreements.
14. Improve management practices through achieving a greater understanding of ecological processes occurring on site and by measuring success of current management practices.

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