CRC for
Water Sensitive Cities

Program A: Society | Project A2.3 | Project duration: July 2013 – July 2017

Engaging communities with water sensitive cities

Overview

The transition to water sensitive cities (WSC) requires broad community acceptance of changes in policy, practice and technology. To achieve this, water practitioners and government agencies will need to effectively engage communities. This project aims to identify effective community engagement strategies that will promote knowledge about water management, build trust in water institutions, and leverage support for policies that promote sustainable water management.

A critical first step in the engagement process is identifying the community's current water related knowledge, termed "water literacy". Little is known about the Australian community's knowledge of water related issues and to what degree this knowledge is important for water conservation behaviours or support of policies related to sustainable urban water management (SUWM). This project will also identify community-friendly terminology and visuals that easily convey key messages relating to SUWM and evaluate what types of messages are more effective in engaging communities.

Key outcomes

The project benchmarks water literacy in Australian communities identifying key gaps in water literacy and key groups within the population to target for improving water literacy. The project will also create an understanding of community attitudes to policies that affect the implementation of SUWM. The project will deliver:

- a database of terms, images and messages about SUWM that effectively inform and engage community members
- capacity building of researchers, experts and practitioners to effectively engage diverse communities, and communicate new or complex information in the area of SUWM
- strategies for researchers, experts and practitioners to effectively engage communities in the transition to WSC.

Early insights into Australian water literacy

A survey was conducted with a representative sample of Australian adults. A series of questions examined knowledge of catchment management, impact of household behaviours on waterways, domestic wastewater and stormwater management, and delivery of drinking water. The survey also investigated attitudes toward water conservation and water conservation behaviours.

Water literacy in Australians is somewhat low, with only 15% of the population exhibiting high water literacy (defined as answering at least 80% of water knowledge questions correctly). Queensland has the highest water literacy (20%) and Victoria the lowest rate (10%).

At least two thirds of respondents know that:

- household actions can influence water quality
- household fertilisers can impair waterway health
- stormwater from houses can impair waterway health
- planting trees near waterways can improve waterway health.

However, less than half of the respondents know that a catchment is the total land area that drains to a river or waterway. In addition, less than one third know that:

- domestic wastewater is treated before entering waterways
- stormwater is not treated before entering waterways
- wastewater and stormwater are carried via different pipes.

The study showed that poorer water literacy is associated with younger age, lower income, lower education, and use of languages other than English in the home. These groups may need more intensive support to promote water literacy. Importantly, water literacy is related to a range of behaviours, including installation of water saving devices in the home, use of water saving strategies in the garden and the home, and greater acceptance of alternative water sources.

An Australian Government Initiative

CRC AUSTRALIA

Project design

This project involves a series of studies that all work toward development of effective community engagement strategies that support the transition to WSC. A national survey of water literacy in 2014 has identified strengths and gaps in community knowledge of water related issues as well as attitudes to SUWM, and identified potential key groups for targeting interventions to promote water literacy.

A desktop review will examine national and international community engagement strategies in areas related to SUWM. This review will showcase best practices and identify what works in community engagement.

A series of interviews, surveys and experimental studies will examine how consumers interpret and respond to language and images used to communicate SUWM. These studies will inform the development of a database of effective and community-friendly terminology and visuals for use in community engagement activities.

- Conduct a national survey of water literacy and identify gaps in knowledge
- Conduct a desktop review of community engagement strategies, and identify "what works"
- Develop a database of community-friendly terminology and visuals that support community engagement
- Synthesise findings to develop strategies for engaging communities in the transition to water sensitive cities

Outlook

The findings from these studies will collectively inform and support the development of strategies that will allow researchers, experts and practitioners to effectively engage communities in the transition to WSC.

On a practical level, project outputs will include guidelines and recommendations for researchers, experts and practitioners for engaging communities in SUWM; and industry workshops to disseminate the findings. Ensuring engagement strategies are aligned with current best practice will improve targeting of resources and optimise the support and participation of all communities in the transition to WSC.

About the Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities

The Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities (CRCWSC) brings together interdisciplinary research expertise and thought-leadership from Australia and the world to address current urban water management challenges facing our cities and regions. In collaboration with over 80 research, government and industry partners, it develops and synthesises knowledge into powerful tools and influences key players aiming to achieve sustainable, resilient and liveable water sensitive cities.

Further information

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