



# 4

*rural revitalisation*

## 4. Rural Revitalisation

**In every Australian state, there is evidence of arts activity being used in programs which encourage economic revitalisation in rural and regional communities. The case studies we present are:**

### Wauchope, NSW

The demise of traditional local industry provoking a response through integrated cultural and economic initiatives shared with local government.

### Atherton Tableland, North Queensland

A remote region experiencing dramatic change has a cleverly managed network of cultural activity linked to social and economic development objectives; one of eight regions included in the national Sustainable Regions Program.

#### Communities in decline

- the economic, social and environmental changes which have affected Australian agriculture since the mid-1970s have given rise to increasing concern not only for the sustainability of family farming, but also the continuing viability of country towns (Tonts, 1996)
- virtually every measure of the standard of living—income, health, education, aged care, access to services, infrastructure, housing—is stable or declining in rural Australia (Sidoti, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998).

Rural communities are experiencing declining populations and changing demographics as economic circumstances change, and people leave to find employment and education.

Communities are affected by a decline in services and the stress and uncertainty of volatile world commodity markets, particularly where the local economy is traditionally based on mining, fishing and agriculture (Black and Kenyon, 2001).

Nationwide understanding of these changes has grown over the last two decades, allowing some communities to respond with positive programs of revitalisation and development. In their well-known analysis, Peter Kenyon and Alan Black

have characterised the desirable outcomes of such programs. They should aim to:

- stabilise, and in many cases increase, the size of the population
- retain and attract young men and women
- diversify the economic and employment opportunities
- maintain an adequate range of services and quality of life for residents
- increase the levels of civic participation and community pride by residents
- preserve what is special about the community.

(Kenyon and Black, 2001)

The Australian Government is implementing strategies to revitalise the economies of rural communities. It does this through its Stronger Regions Program linked with the Department of Transport and Regional Services and organisations such as the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Similarly, state government agencies such as the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, Regional Development Victoria and the Western Australian Department of Commerce and Trade are working closely with rural and regional communities to enhance their economic development; as is the South Australian Government through its regional development strategies.

Meanwhile, the need for institutional reform, especially of financial institutions, is argued by the National Farmers Federation (NFF) on the grounds that investment in rural and regional communities is insufficient to sustain existing incomes and prevent declining employment:

With rapid growth in investment funds through superannuation, NFF believes there should be increasing opportunities for equity finance for regional business, however, there is significant anecdotal evidence that there is a disproportionate flow of funds away from regional and rural areas. (National Farmers' Federation, 2002)

Considerable international and Australian research documents the skills and capacities required for economically and socially vibrant communities, including:

- well developed problem solving skills among local groups
- commitment to wide community participation in civic affairs
- leaders with vision and residents with a strong sense of community
- collaboration and consensus on goals and priorities
- government that provides enabling support
- the ability to manage community conflict.

(Kenyon and Black, 2001)

Community cultural development would seem to add an important dimension to the complex range of processes and strategies needed to revitalise communities. Collective creative processes can help develop bonding social capital (see discussion on page 10) by encouraging leadership, strengthening communication, re-establishing and enhancing feelings of mutuality and reciprocity and bringing fresh techniques to community consultation processes.

In addition to these instrumental applications of community cultural development, creative processes can also be used to search out the 'deep clues' to the new ways of thinking and acting that are needed to revitalise communities. For example, community cultural development has a role to play in reforming

institutions, which arguably need changing at the fundamental level of their organisational values:

The solution is seen to lie in policies for rural Australia that support an infusion of new values into our institutions—values associated with the development of bridging ties and relationships through cooperation, goodwill, common-wealth and tolerance. Design and re-design of institutions with such qualities will require engagement of the community in new ways.

In the first instance, informed debate is required on values and options, involving analysis of scenarios for, and the implications of, change. Concepts of ‘community’ must be revived in the context of a lifelong learning culture supported by social capital. Revised approaches to work and learning, improved processes for community and stakeholder involvement, policies to more actively involve women, a central role for the arts, and re-assessment of property rights arrangements, are seen to be important tools for change. (Falk and Kingma, 2000)

The case studies show:

- how community cultural development has been effective in finding solutions to the problems of declining or changing populations
- how community cultural development has enhanced social capital in rural and regional communities
- how community cultural development has been linked to rural leadership programs and used in community consultation programs
- why community cultural development is an effective tool for exploring and instilling new values in our institutions and policies for rural Australia.

## Wauchope

**In many respects the 5000-strong community of Wauchope, 20 kilometres inland from Port Macquarie on the mid-north coast of NSW, is representative of a large and growing number of small Australian towns grappling with dramatic changes in population size and make-up as well as changed economic conditions and industry base.**

When the Wauchope community produced its Bago Community Celebration from July to October 2003, it embarked upon a revitalisation of this annual event by adopting a community cultural development approach. One aim was to engage a wider range of community members in the event. But the underlying motivation was to tackle broader issues.

At the height of its timber-based economy, Wauchope was the commercial and administrative heart of the Hastings region. It now feels the negative impact of the restructure of the timber and dairying industries and the subsequent loss of the community’s traditional economic base. As a result:

Community regeneration initiatives are seen as important in Wauchope and there are currently a range of community initiatives to diversify Wauchope’s economic base with a strong focus on supporting and marketing locally grown produce and promoting the area’s attributes as a rural community with a unique cultural heritage. There is a growing awareness that the arts also have a role to play in community renewal. (Flowers, 2003)

Initiatives for revitalising Wauchope have grown from a partnership between the Wauchope Community Arts Council, the Centre for Popular Education at the University of Technology Sydney and Hastings Council (centred on Port Macquarie which holds the title of City of the Arts for 2001–03). As a key strategy aimed at community strengthening, the partners are using the Bago Community Celebration to ‘re-vision the town and build community cohesion, identity and spirit’ (Flowers, 2003). The celebration is also seen as an opportunity to foster partnerships with a broad range of public and private sector organisations to try to influence the broader economic and social development of the community.

I have glided through vines, twigs and branches,  
Rustled around in the leaves of the past.  
I have seen fires and loggers, hunters and watchers,  
Distant travellers from the other side of the world,  
I warn the wildlife of all approaches,  
Time and again I have been burnt, but I cannot be destroyed,  
I am the spirit of the mountain.

*Jamie Leigh Johnson, St Joseph’s Primary School  
(Bago Stories Creative Writing Workshop)*

In this way, other key agencies and organisations have become involved with the celebration and with long range planning for town revitalisation: the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Wauchope Chamber of Commerce, the *Hastings Gazette*, local schools, and a range of Wauchope businesses and community organisations.

Building on a base of local arts activity, and previous arts festivals, processes of community cultural development have increased the engagement of community members with the celebration. Small businesses, local artists, landholders, ex-state foresters, bushwalkers, the local photographic society, scouts and many local families became involved.

For the 2003 celebration, the key activity was the creation of Bago Stories, a project building on traditions of storytelling about the relationship between people and the local Broken Bago mountain range. Managed by a steering group, Bago Stories used discovery tours and excursions, along with photographic and storytelling workshops, poetry and song writing, the production of a mural, and celebratory events. These creative activities allowed community engagement with the newly declared Bago Bluff National Park—an area that was previously state forest. The program provided a way to explore traditional and new connections to place, seen as a precondition to community redevelopment.

#### **Bago Stories: Steering Group**

The four main involved parties formed a representative management group which drove this project forward:

- Wauchope Chamber of Commerce
- Hastings Council
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Wauchope Community Arts Council.

The ongoing involvement of the Centre for Popular Education allows systematic evaluation strategies, themselves important as developmental tools, to be integrated with celebration activities and long range planning.

As the centrepiece of the 2003 Community Celebration, Bago Stories is regarded as a very successful project, with outcomes relevant to ongoing planning by organisations responsible for community revitalisation. For example, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) considers that the project:

- engaged the community and brought together planners from various agencies and community organisations
- reached a variety of community groups and individuals
- provided a previously lacking profile for the Park and for NPWS within the Wauchope community

- allowed consultation with a range of

community groups on the land use issues and educational opportunities associated with the Bago Bluff National Park

- assembled valuable resource material relating to cultural and natural heritage: images, historical information, contacts

- gave impetus to and provided perspectives for the development of a Plan of Management for Bago Bluff National Park.

The community, assisted by the Centre for Popular Education, is embarking on long range evaluation of the Bago Stories project, and more generally the Bago Community Celebration, as a strategy for community revitalisation. The example underscores the relevance of celebrations as a means of strengthening local communities as they embark on systematic renewal programs. It also shows how the relationship between agencies (for example, NPWS) and a small rural community can foster an exchange of values which influence the response of agencies to community priorities.

#### **For further information**

##### **Website:**

[www.cpe.uts.edu.au/pdfs/bago\\_web.pdf](http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/pdfs/bago_web.pdf)

##### **Key publications:**

Flowers, Rick (2003), *Community Festivals and Community Building: Hastings NSW 4th City for the Arts; a community celebration of who we are, where we live and what we can become*, Centre for Popular Education, UTS Sydney.



### The Bluff of Broken Bago

*'Neath the Bluff of Broken Bago  
Where the lyre-birds build their nest,  
The wattles bloom in the spring-time,  
And the sunset gilds the West.  
The currawongs call from the ranges,  
And the song of the creek sings low,  
While a lullaby of the forest,  
Drifts on the sunset glow.  
Under the cool dim hollows,  
Where sweet wild violets bloom,  
The tiny ferns and mosses  
Shine in some shady gloom.  
Where Tecoma brightens the morning,  
Gold faces ope to the sun.  
Clematis, pale in the moonlight,  
Over the tree-tops run.  
Oh! give me the song of the gullies,  
And my heart can be at rest.  
Oh! give me the song of the bell-birds,  
And my life with joy is blessed.*

By Win Godfrey

Written at Dr Tony Simpson's place  
under the Bluff of Broken Bago.  
January 1988.



**Left:** Win Godfrey, from the Bago Stories project. Photo: Roman Schatz.

**Above:** Yungaburra Tapestry, from the Atherton Tablelands project. Photo: Eve Stafford.

## Atherton Tablelands

**The Australian Government's Sustainable Regions Program uses a new approach to the delivery of regional programs in Australia, and is designed to encourage communities to make informed decisions and implement projects that will create a sustainable future for their region.**

### Regional challenges

As one of eight regions included in the Sustainable Regions Program, the Atherton Tablelands has received \$18 million over three years to enable it to become more economically viable and socially cohesive, and to achieve responsible management of its natural resources. Heavily reliant on agriculture, the Tablelands qualified for inclusion in the program following the collapse of most of the region's key industries: the timber and tobacco industries have disappeared, the sugar industry is significantly impacted by low prices, and deregulation of the dairy industry has had a negative effect.

The Tablelands includes four local government areas that were previously economic competitors. However the new initiative has seen the development of a regional Strategic Framework and Prospectus for Regional Development.

### Regional response: the role of cultural development

The Prospectus includes and partially integrates cultural and arts activity within planning initiatives for the region. (Planning covers agriculture, industry and resources, tourism, culture and arts, environment, social infrastructure and youth.) Specifically, culture is seen to 'add value' to tourism strategies, as well as generating employment and regional income from a diverse range of arts activities.

The opportunity for closer integration of culture with all other dimensions of planning and development has not gone unnoticed by the region's network of practitioners in community cultural development. The established regional body Arts Nexus, which operates across Far North Queensland, is charged with developing a regional cultural strategy with associated action research. This chimes with several new and existing community cultural development programs which have emerged across the Tablelands.

For example, there have been several recent public art projects that link tourism development with the identity of rural towns. These include a main street project in Kuranda, a recreation foreshore project at Tinaroo for Atherton Shire Council, a youth murals project in Mareeba, and an Indigenous public art project linked to housing development.

Meanwhile a regional Youth Entrepreneurial Program has been developed to respond to the needs and unique strengths of each town. In a 'creative industry' approach, young people at risk, living in former tobacco town Mareeba, have been trained in computing and multimedia, producing work for an exhibition in

Cairns. All these young people had been expelled from schools, but are now back in the education system as a result of the project. In another initiative, a Tablelands craft and design project is opening up new pathways for export from the region, with two trade 'expos' already mounted in Singapore. Other elements of the Youth Program include mentorships, place making projects, and oral history. In essence, all these projects are designed to develop entrepreneurial and leadership skills, not through formal training courses, but in the context of local arts and cultural practice linked to social and economic objectives of towns and the region.

These new initiatives relate to and extend a late-1990s regional program targeting rural women and providing leadership experiences and training through arts activity. (This program, initiated by the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women, is described on page 102). In the Atherton Tablelands, more than 100 women took part in this program, with many then taking pathways to key leadership positions in the tourism, arts and sugar industries, and local government. (One woman became mayor of her town.) The program established fertile ground for the current appreciation of the role of arts and community cultural development, as well as long-term changes in institutions and policy.

As new planning gets under way within the framework of the Sustainable Regions Program, Arts Nexus is well placed to foster greater integration of the arts into the local economy. The organisation is working closely with the Queensland State Development Department, and has taken on the role of secretariat for the Creative Industries program.

Challenges include the need to realign arts and cultural policies of both state and local governments to take further account of regional opportunities, including prospects for trade and cultural exchange with the Asia-Pacific region; and the need for further brokerage to take full advantage of potential linkages between the arts and sectors previously regarded as 'hard core' economic domains.

### For further information

#### Website:

[www.artsnexus.com.au](http://www.artsnexus.com.au)

#### Key publications:

Atherton Tablelands Sustainable Region Advisory Committee (2003), *Atherton Tablelands Strategic Framework and Prospectus for Regional Development 2002–2005*, Department of Transport and Regional Services.

### Atherton Tablelands: Summary of outcomes of integrated cultural activity

- The arts is becoming established as one of several key and viable industries.
- Long-term cultural development is gaining momentum across the region.
- Community cultural development processes foster leadership initiatives, particularly among youth.
- Linkages between cultural and other sectors are valued and extended as a key strategy of regional development.
- Tourism and environment sectors impacted by learning through cultural activity.