



Cover story

Hepburn Wind: 90 members take a visit to the site after the two turbines were erected in late March.
 source: Tibor Hegedis.

There are a number of communities of varying size and ambition demonstrating what can be achieved when people, local governments and NGOs band together for a common purpose.

The first part of this article (Habitat July, 2010) discussed the difficulty of encouraging personal behaviour change around energy usage and sustainability. Even though selecting energy efficient appliances reduces domestic consumption, these gains have been more than offset by invisible trends such as the growing popularity of energy hungry domestic appliances.

The risk of emphasising individual environmental responsibility and its connotations of guilt can also turn people to denial or despair.

The article suggested an alternative course promoting collective behaviour change through civic enterprise. Here are three examples of Australian communities that have decided not to wait on national policy leadership, but to take matters of climate change into their own hands by transforming the way they live.

Donald

Location: VIC
Population: 1700

Donald is a small Victorian town that decided it could make a difference, albeit a modest one toward a sustainable society.

Donald 2000 is a community enterprise initiative that encouraged residents to install domestic PV systems throughout the shire. John McConville, Donald 2000 convener, had a vision: "I had this concept in my mind that I would like everyone to have some form of solar for two reasons. One, to help our environment and two, to save people money. I believed we could make a difference... even if it was miniscule."

This difference meant 140 Donald households took part in the founding program.

The success of the Donald initiative is due to proactive engagement with the local community and a strong sense of civic pride.

"We recently ran another meeting and over 60 people attended," John said.

"We wanted to get more households committed to install solar and to reintroduce our supplier/installer to existing customers who are ready to upgrade their systems. We had a very positive response and several householders bought systems on the night."

The program has generated rippling environmental and economic benefits to the town. Some local businesses now operate selling and installing solar products.

But the strongest outcome is the creation of a community of concerned citizens who, with a common purpose, are committed to collective, worthwhile contribution.

"Apart from the obvious money saving benefits you have less carbon emissions, a cleaner environment, and are part of (a group of) concerned people who care about our environment and want to contribute in a worthwhile fashion."

Donald 2000's agenda goes beyond its domestic PV program. Bulk tree planting has been underway for several years, assisting in lowering the water table.

"I would love a solar farm. We have a very good climate, lots of space and the infrastructure to make it happen."

The generation of great ideas

Danny Vadasz looks at the power of personal behaviour change in very real community examples. This article is the second in a two part series.



Natimuk

Location: VIC
Population: 450; 750 in the wider area

Natimuk residents decided they wanted to be a greenhouse gas free and zero waste town. It was a community, not council, decision born out of a workshop in 2007.

A small and active group of locals have since been working out exactly how to make their town emissions and waste free.

Activities have included film screenings, including *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Cuba – The Power of Community*, tours of solar and wind powered homes, and establishing solar bulk purchase initiatives. Thirty five homes in the township purchased solar PV systems in the first solar group purchase – the equivalent of 20 per cent of the town.

Consideration of the prohibitive upfront cost of purchasing solar systems in the second round of the solar group purchase has led to community information nights. Neighbours share stories of their experiences and cost savings as a result of having PV systems. It's a proactive way of sharing information and encouraging change.



They create a vehicle to enable concerned citizens to go way beyond changing a light bulb

The lofty goal to be a zero emission town is grounded in practical grassroots action. Their aim is to see PV systems on every house and on all community facilities in town. There is real interest in developing a community scale alternative energy system.

Hepburn Springs/Daylesford
Location: Central Victoria Goldfields
Population: 2000 homes

Hepburn Wind is a shining example of community doing it for themselves.

The cooperative has built two wind turbines at Leonards Hill, becoming Australia's first community-owned wind farm, 10km south of Daylesford.

The wind farm is projected to generate an average of 12,200 MWh annually. This is equivalent to the demand of 2900 average

Victorian households and more than accounts for the needs of the 2000 houses in the Daylesford precinct.

Electricity produced by the turbines will be fed into the local grid (connected to the national electricity network) and will offset 12,200 tonnes of CO₂ every year.

But no one should assume that the road to energy independence has been without hurdles.

Hepburn Wind has been careful to build community consensus for the project, running more than 120 information stalls in the local area, conducting home visits, running bus tours to wind turbines at nearby wind farms, and hosting public forums about wind farms and sustainability issues.

The six year process has been so successful that when the planning permit was assessed by Hepburn Shire Council in February 2007, council had received 325 submissions in support of the proposal and just 18 objections.

But the most remarkable achievement of Hepburn Wind has been the ability to raise funds required for the project. Over \$8.7 million was raised through investment by its almost 1600 member shareholders, with approximately \$1.7 million from grants and a \$3.1 million loan from Bendigo and Adelaide Bank.

The project is expected to offer a commercial return on investment and with the majority of investors being local, a significant portion of returns will stay within the community. The model also provides a proof-of-concept for community ownership of renewable energy infrastructure.

Hepburn Wind intends to contribute more than \$1 million in grants to shore up the long term sustainability of the local area and currently employs three staff and provided practical business experience for over 30 people in the renewable energy sector.

Hepburn's success has inspired many communities to emulate its success. Embark, an initiative born out of the Hepburn project currently provides practical assistance to 43 community groups around Australia each mapping out their own low-emissions pathways (see Habitat page 24).

Community initiatives such as these provide an alternative to the stalemate that has left ordinary people on the sidelines of the climate change debate. They create a vehicle to enable concerned citizens to go way beyond changing a light bulb or signing a petition. And most importantly, they provide hope and inspiration that ordinary people can still do extraordinary things.