

2015 National LETS Conference - Opening Address

by Alison Bird

How has Tableland LETS survived and thrived for 24 years? How has it become the most active trading group in Australia?

We acknowledge the traditional Custodians of this area, the Ngadjon people – thank you for sharing country with us.

In this talk I will cover

1. a very brief history of Tableland LETS – starting by introducing myself
2. possible factors that make Tableland LETS great – or things that work for us

I was one of the founding members of Tableland LETS. I've lived on the Tablelands in Yungaburra for about 27 years. We're in Brisbane most of the time now mainly for health reasons.

My background is in science – marine biology, and then I jumped over to the arts and I thank LETS for helping my career change. I had completed my PhD on seaweed ecology and spent a year working with kids music and circus, then when LETS started I had my first child. Living here I didn't want to commute to the sea to for a marine science job. With my babies I started playing with paints and I developed my wildlife art cards using the kids paintings in collage. LETS was a great outlet for my experiments. I tried various crafts in the LETS shop and so began our family business supplying cards to galleries and gift shops for over 20 years.

I haven't time to tell you all my best LETS trades but my family did go overseas a couple of years' ago and use CES for accommodation in Europe. (You can ask me about it.)

HISTORY

We started Tableland LETS in 1990. I had read about Maleny LETS in the Down to Earth Magazine and I talked with 2 friends in Atherton. I like to think it was my idea, but really I think they'd been reading about it too. Anyway the time was right and we said let's do it. Ponne went to Maleny to learn methods from Jill Jordan. Colin worked very hard on setting up, and by March 1991 we launched Tableland LETS.

We chose the name “bartle” for our units based on the highest mountain in Queensland, Mt Bartle Frere. We muddled through our first trades. I'll never forget my first trade. I bought a highchair for the baby for 10B from Shaun. Neither of us knew what we were doing and it was very exciting. Accounts were recorded and totted up on paper. Offers and Wants and newsletters were posted by snail mail, and invariably out of date by the time they reached the members. The most useful thing was the member contact list (on paper) so we could ring around for wants, and of course trading events were key.

We were in the media a bit. After we featured in the Weekend Australian page 3 (1991) we were flooded with enquiries and Australian LETS groups multiplied rapidly.

Eventually there was fundraising for a computer. We had some amazing boom years with a busy shop front in Atherton opening in 1992. Non-members could also shop there and buy goods for \$ and that was supposed to cover the rent. We also opened the LETS Relax Centre and local healers say that's where they got their break. The LETS shop continued for 6 years.

Then a time came when the rent in \$ became prohibitive so the shop was closed which was a very difficult decision followed by a decline and some quiet years. A handful of loyal members kept trading and meeting on Gavin's verandah.

Bel joined in 2007 and got us onto the internet, with a website linked to CES. Bel's amazing leadership has taken us through exponential growth to the amazing thriving system we are today. Currently Tableland LETS has 735 active members (over 780 registered with 6% who haven't traded). For examples of our amazing trading activity, in 2014 there were 206 341 B traded in 7066 transactions. Last month 15 018 B were traded in 608 transactions.

Coordinator

A vital factor in the growth and recent success of Tableland LETS has been the leadership of Bel Moore. Bel is quite an extraordinary person. Her vision, cleverness and business acumen have stimulated many improvements to the way the system works.

We don't have ghastly long boring meetings – we don't have meetings at all. When there are decisions to be made an email goes around and we get on with it. I think this is important because so often admin burns out because the meetings get to be so awful (in my opinion). Bel is good at delegating tasks, and administration work is broken down so the more time-consuming duties are shared. Workers are paid in bartles for admin work done.

Hubs

Tableland LETS is the only exchange anywhere in the far north and at present the group covers a vast geographic area, also including the city of Cairns. In each town is a LETS “hub” with a local area coordinator who organises a regular monthly trading event and liaises with local members. This is a great way to spread the workload and also focus the activity in each neighbourhood.

Trading events

Having trading days in each “hub” means that our calendar of events is very full with meetings happening somewhere in the region on every weekend and some weeknights. The range of venues and times gives increased options for trading, and keen members travel to multiple events.

Pick-up/Drop-off points

When LETS members negotiate a trade in response to a listing on CES, they may make a plan for the items to be left at a central pick-up place. In many of the hubs is a designated space, for example on or under someone's home verandah, where others can leave goods for collection. Items are labelled with the buyer's name and left on the shelves.

In Atherton, Irene's pick-up space, commonly known as the LETShed, is also like a fruit shop because not only do LETS members leave their excess produce there to trade, but also Irene talks to local residents when she sees fallen fruit rotting in neighbouring gardens. They are generally keen to reduce wastage by donating their fruit to the LETS shop. Individual members may also sell their non-perishable goods here. *How might this translate to a city exchange? Is it possible to have drop-off places without theft and vandalism?*

Shared meal

Many of Tableland LETS' trading events involve a potluck meal, where members bring a plate of food to share. This is easy for the host, caters for all diets, becomes an enjoyable social occasion and provides the best feed ever! Over the meal people chat about food and cooking and this inevitably leads to sharing of recipes and gardening information and ends up with more trading.

Circle time

Often trading events include sitting in a circle where members take it in turns to briefly announce their offers and wants. It usually leads to useful discussion and brainstorming to solve problems. The process encourages trading of services (not just goods) and wants (not just offerings).

Sponsorship month

December is our sponsorship month, when existing members may recruit new members by paying their joining fee in units (20 bartles in lieu of \$20). Thus new members can join for free if an existing member is willing to pay 20B to sponsor them. Members are encouraged to think of people they can invite to join up. It might be someone who has goods or services they want to buy, or perhaps a customer who can't really afford to buy their goods or services, and would benefit from access to it through LETS. This has been very successful as both a membership drive and also a bartle fundraiser.

Annual Levy

Tableland LETS has no transaction fee, but an annual levy instead, so as not to discourage trading and entering trades. We actually asked CES HQ to switch off the transaction fee so the 4% is not charged on each trade. Each year every member is charged a levy of usually 15 units. From this our dues are paid to CES and there is some left over for the Admin account.

Debit and credit limits

In Tableland LETS upper and lower limits are set at + or -1000 bartles and everyone is encouraged to aim for a balance of zero. Anyone who goes over the limit may be asked if they need help to find ways to earn or spend, and if there is no willingness to reduce their balance, their account may be locked although this seems to happen only rarely. Often there is a good reason for going over the limit, such as a big outlay for a working bee or the sale of an expensive item. If the member has a history of effective trading (BOTH earning and spending) then usually the limit can be temporarily lifted to allow continued trading while the member endeavours to bring their balance back towards zero. *Note: each exchange sets their own optional limits and it is interesting to see they vary widely. I gather the original recommendation from the global CES was limits of + or – 5000.*

Community Chest

Tableland LETS has a charity account where anyone can donate bartles and from time to time the committee decides an amount from the community chest to be given to a needy recipient or a good cause. *(The community chest has had lots of donations and been used for things like helping to set up the realfood network, helping a pregnant tenant with her bond-cleaning etc.)*

Working bees

A working bee is a great way to get a big job done. Ten or 20 people working for a couple of hours can really accomplish something, then sit down for a shared meal, a chat and a bit of trading. The working bee may involve a range of tasks (indoors and outdoors) to suit all abilities, and often families attend and even children earn some units. Workers are paid by the hour, it is a good opportunity to earn, and the host may spend hundreds of units in one day.

Workshops

Tableland LETS has offered a wide variety of interesting workshops, for example sourdough baking, natural health, weaving, soapmaking, bee keeping, hotwater from compost, building in stone, Linux, crisis management, alternative communication, and so on. Sometimes people are attracted to join LETS through their interest in a workshop.

Facebook page

This is helpful to promote event information as well as providing a forum for discussion and problem-solving. Word of mouth is how most trading and membership starts; Facebook is another place where many members interact and this is why it's important.

Resource library

Tableland LETS has a collection of books and DVDs to lend to members. Also, for a while monthly film nights were very popular and attracted new members. Films about alternative economics and other issues of interest were shown and afterwards there would be discussion (over a shared meal).

CONCLUSION

We often try to say LETS is just a system for exchanging goods and services, similar in a way to the yellow pages, but in truth Tableland LETS is a warm supportive community network. There have been countless times that Tableland LETS has been the centre of problem-solving, rescue, caring and other ways of looking after people, which ends up really enhancing the community as a safe and nurturing place to live.

I have rushed through some of the factors I think are key to the success of Tableland LETS.

What else could it be? I don't know if there is something about the region and its people

3. size of the community / demographics
4. remote location
5. lack of much freecycle or roadside “festival of garbage”
6. the type of people in this area who perhaps are here by choice, not desperation, including tree-changers and people persuing a sustainable lifestyle
7. people who have travelled the world and decided this is the most beautiful place, so these are individuals with a Utopian mindset. I don't know... I made that up.

It's my feeling that once the group reached a critical size there was so much on offer you'd be mad not to be in it. With a small group, fewer members means fewer offers, and people would hold back, unsure if they can buy enough value for their units, so they'd prefer \$ for what they have to offer. Currently, at least for households, there's no holding back. But for businesses we're mostly not there yet I think. Businesses might be still feeling they could easily earn way more than they can spend in LETS. (*I wonder if raising the limits would help, or what...*)

To conclude, a word of encouragement to the smaller groups – we've been there. I'm sure setting up in a vacuum is the hardest part – introducing the concept to a community that has been taught the rule : if it sounds too good to be true it's probably a scam! Having even a small network in place is good preparation for an uncertain future. So take heart that whatever you are doing in your group may be paving the way for bigger and better at some point in the future, and I hope you can see this is how it happened in Tableland LETS.