

Senate inquiry into the indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Australia

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The National Environmental Science Programme (NESP) Project 3.2.2 provided a methodology for assessing and monitoring the Great Barrier Reef (GBR)'s human dimensions as a key mechanism to support governance and management of the GBR World Heritage Area (Gooch et al 2018a). It used a conceptual framework to identify appropriate sets of indicators for characterising the desired state of the GBR's human dimensions at the whole-of-GBR and regional scales. Using the framework, 25 indicator attributes that describe people's relationship with the GBR were grouped into five key attribute clusters which align with the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan Outcomes. These are: (i) human aspirations, capacities and stewardship associated with the GBR; (ii) community vitality; (iii) economic values; (iv) culture and heritage; and (v) the health of governance systems affecting GBR outcomes. This work was undertaken with collaboration and input from the GBR-wide Reef 2050 Plan Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program (RIMReP) Human Dimensions Expert Group and six Regional Discussion Panels in the GBR catchment (Gooch et al 2018a)

The value of this assessment is that it quickly highlights regional differences in terms of community resilience and consequent inequalities within and between regions, with a general trend of disadvantage away from South East Queensland. The biggest inequities uncovered through the assessment were between Eastern Cape York and the rest of the GBR catchment, where issues such as inadequate road infrastructure; job shortages; lack of economic diversity; limited housing choice and affordability; potential impact of flooding and coastal hazards; land tenure limiting options for growth; and high infrastructure costs, all seriously impact quality of life for residents. Few residents in any Cape York Indigenous town own their own home, largely because of the lack of enabling tenure and local land administration systems. Further, Eastern Cape York is the most economically vulnerable of all GBR regions. Residents there are highly welfare-dependent and have very limited employment opportunities (Gooch et al 2018b). Enabling the long term social and economic viability of Eastern Cape York requires expanding and diversifying the region's economic base, and reducing reliance on government support. As well, investment is needed in programs which support mobility for work and employment. Unfortunately, however, planning, tenure and land use conflicts reduce investor confidence in economic opportunities.

By contrast the Burnett-Mary Region is reasonably well-serviced by schools, hospitals, road, rail, airports, water, gas and electricity (Gooch et al 2018c). However, there is variation in community vitality within the Burnett-Mary Region. For example, the ageing coastal population, loss of youth further inland, mobility of the Indigenous population and rapid expansion of some Burnett-Mary urban centres reflects a fluctuating population that requires good access to health and wellbeing services and appropriate housing. Regional personal income in the Burnett-Mary is below the state average, particularly in the Aboriginal community of Cherbourg. Regional and youth unemployment is higher than the state average. Increasingly ageing populations in coastal centres are more likely to be retired or heading towards retirement. Even so, the housing market in coastal areas is slowly recovering from a sharp decline after the 2011 floods, although many rural areas are static or in decline. Regional economic confidence is generally subdued (with the exception of the agricultural sector which is very profitable). However the region's strategic location between South-East Queensland and the industrial hub of Gladstone, and close to the Surat Basin has access benefits (Gooch et al 2018c).

An issue raised by assessment (using the best available information at the time) is the need for Australian and Queensland governments to actively pursue policies to increase economic diversity and adaptive capacity of GBR-dependent regions (particularly north of Gladstone) so that GBR communities can avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

References

- Gooch, M., Marshall, N., Dale, A., & Vella, K. (2018a). *NESP Project 3.2.2 Final Report: Trialling an Assessment and Monitoring Program for the Human Dimensions of the Reef 2050 Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program* Report to the National Environmental Science Programme. Reef and Rainforest Research Centre Limited, Cairns (88pp).
- Gooch, M., Dale, A., Marshall, N., & Vella, K. (2018b). *Assessing the human dimensions of the Great Barrier Reef: An Eastern Cape York region focus*. Report to the National Environmental Science Programme. Reef and Rainforest Research Centre Limited, Cairns (46pp).
- Gooch, M., Dale, A., Marshall, N., & Vella, K. (2018c). *Assessing the human dimensions of the Great Barrier Reef: A Burnett-Mary region focus*. Report to the National Environmental Science Programme. Reef and Rainforest Research Centre Limited, Cairns (50pp).