

# **House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage**

## **Inquiry into Catchment Management**

### **A Submission by the Brunswick Catchment Management Committee**

#### **Background:**

The Brunswick Catchment Management Committee (BCMC) have considered the role of Catchment Committees in NSW and the relationship between Catchment Management Committees and other committees involved in natural resource management, in particular in relation to ensuring effective and ongoing community participation in natural resource management planning and implementation.

#### **Terms of Reference:**

##### **The Development of Catchment Management in the Brunswick Catchment**

The Brunswick Catchment Management Committee (BCMC) was formed by the NSW state Government in 1995, one of the last and smallest catchments to get its own committee. In the three years from September 1995 to May 1998 the committee was extremely active, and was successful in raising the consciousness of the community that landuse actions on single properties impact on the catchment as a whole. They assisted the community to begin to embrace this and began to achieve outcomes with best practice and sustainable management principles.

A lot was achieved in this three year term (see Appendix 1), so the community was dismayed when the NSW Government did not automatically reappoint members to the BCMC to continue the community and government partnership in achieving sustainable natural resource management. Much lobbying to the Premier and the Minister for Land and Water Conservation from the catchment community saw the reappointment of the BCMC in early 1999. Since that time the community members have enthusiastically worked to reinspire the landholders, landusers and the tourist population in ways they can manage to live sustainably in the catchment.

##### **The value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment and best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchment and achieving environmental sustainability.**

The physical catchment is the ideal landscape area on which to focus for effective natural resource management. Land, water and biodiversity issues cannot be effectively dealt with in isolation because of the interrelationship between them. A community can readily appreciate the idea of “downstream effects” because they can see and feel for themselves that the catchment landscape is a functioning physical and biological entity. People can get their minds and hearts around the concept of the catchment. As most community members travel predominantly within their own catchment for social, economic and leisure reasons they are connected to the landscape and develop a sense of place for the catchment.

Sustainable natural resource management depends on landholders and landusers embracing the principles of sustainability and best practice techniques on their own parcels of land. The close connection between community members on Catchment Management Committees with their peers, friends and neighbours

ensures in the long term that these methods are willingly embraced by each landholder on each parcel of land. This is a true bottom up approach to environmental and sustainability change, and the “bottom” is where sustainable practices must be implemented.

The catchment approach ensures that issues and solutions are specific to the catchment community. The BCMC has a strong link with Landcare and other care groups within the catchment and this leads to on-ground works with best practice being implemented on a scale wider than that of a single property. The Landcare community are the cornerstone of onground implementation of the catchment management process.

Natural Resource Management committees are most effective when they work closely with their communities. To this end, small, active, catchment based Catchment Management Committees are:

- more able to consult with their communities and have ongoing contact with them.
- more cost efficient - less expensive travel claims, no accommodation costs etc. Smaller number of members, therefore reduced sitting fees.
- able to meet regularly and frequently, as there are no long distances to travel to attend meetings,
- more responsive to urgent and pressing issues as they can call meetings at short notice to discuss such issues,
- more recognisable because their boundaries are the physical catchment boundaries,
- more likely to develop close, cooperative relationships with their local council/s,
- able to engender a greater sense of ownership. This is magnified by the fact that smaller catchments usually share common boundaries with social units.

### **The role of different levels of government, the private sector and the community in the management of catchment areas.**

One of the great benefits of BCMC is that the committee reflects the diversity of the community, together with relevant NREM state government agencies and local government. This facilitates easy two way communication, and awareness and education for all groups involved. Therefore, debate arising from issues, sometimes from many diverse viewpoints, is from an informed position. Local, intimate knowledge of issues, of the catchment and of other members on the committee leads to real information exchange, understanding and cooperation.

Within the Brunswick catchment there is one local government authority. This very favourable overlap leads to a strong and cooperative liaison to achieve sustainable land-use, water quality and vegetation planning. Byron Shire Council and the BCMC can coordinate efforts to bring about change in a timely fashion which precisely suit the catchment community. It also ensures that Council’s individual decisions, such as the approval of Development Applications, are compatible with the cooperative, long term strategic plans for the catchment.

As it is the State Government Agencies with the legislative power for most of the areas of concern for sustainability it is imperative that there are close links between these agencies and the BCMC, and through them, the catchment community. Regionalization and rationalisation of Catchment Management Committees would have a very negative impact on the implementation of catchment level outcomes. Discussions of this type at a state level have already seen a weakening of commitment by the NSW Government to the principle of community and government cooperation.

It is imperative that the state agencies adopt a cooperative policy across the state, and that regional staff are instructed to maintain involvement in Catchment Management Committees as a priority activity. Input and involvement from local agency representatives in individual CMCs is paramount to the success of local initiatives, as it is through these local networks that local projects are developed and implemented, and that communication and coordination takes place. However, it is also important for these links to be maintained and fostered at the CEO level, to ensure coordination at a state scale. There has been some recent discussion about the costs incurred by state agencies in maintaining local agency staff on CMCs and other NREM committees. However, it is important to note that time spent with the CMC can greatly improve the efficiency of agency activities through the networking opportunities, information sharing, coordination and cooperation that the CMCs achieve.

### **Planning, resourcing, implementation, coordination and cooperation in catchment management.**

#### Planning:

The BCMC is in the early stages of planning its Catchment Management Strategy. The committee will conduct extensive sub-catchment community consultation to gain effective community participation in the resultant Strategy. As a small, catchment based committee we are able to conduct workshops in each of the subcatchments, and we have the local connections to ensure good attendance of the catchment community. In this way, the Brunswick Catchment Management Strategy will be a living document with genuine community ownership. This in turn will ensure that recommendations made in the strategy will be adopted and implemented by the community.

Further, with cooperation from Byron Shire council to utilise their extensive vegetation mapping, land use planning and community committee structure it will be possible to implement sustainable natural resource ideals and outcomes for the catchment. The BCMC itself has no legislative powers to obtain outcomes, which is seen as both a benefit and a hindrance by different sectors of the community. With close cooperation with the local council it may be possible to obtain some degree of enforceable strategy for natural resource management and on ground best practice.

Catchment Management Committees' role in determining distribution of Federal natural resource management funding through their assessment of Natural Heritage Trust funding applications assists in the implementation of catchment strategies.

#### Resourcing:

There are 2 resourcing issues in relation to catchment management, the resourcing for and by the committee, and the resourcing of on ground works.

- The committee: The community members on the BCMC gain a sitting fee for 4 meetings per year and traveling expenses to attend all meetings. Community committee members attend at least one sub-committee meeting per week, as well as other working groups, special weekend functions and as delegates to other NREM committees in the catchment. This sees them volunteer a very significant number of hours to achieve sustainable natural resource outcomes. This time is completely unresourced and we believe illustrates the real strength behind the Catchment approach to natural resource management. The committee members have a heart connection to the place and work effectively to engender this in the whole community.

Each CMC also has a Coordinator who is currently hosted by the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC). This host agency relationship has been beneficial in many ways, including the access to information, resources and staff who are most relevant to the committee's activities.

However, there is the ongoing issue of perceived ownership of CMCs by DLWC, and the resultant reluctance of other agencies to participate in the process. This is not a significant issue at a local level, as the individual agency representatives on the Brunswick CMC are committed to the process, and the benefits of the host agency relationship outweigh any disadvantages, although greater agency support at higher levels would be an advantage.

The Coordinator requires some additional resourcing, including access to vehicles and operating budgets. They must be given adequate administrative assistance to provide effective executive support to their committees. This will allow the Coordinator to manage and coordinate the committees projects, and community participation processes.

There still exists a disparity of grade and permanency between the Coordinators across the state, with some Coordinators Grade 3 permanent and others Grade 1/2 temporary. This inequity affects the stability of staffing for committees, and should be addressed.

- On-ground Works: The majority of funding for onground works carried out by Landcare groups comes from NHT or Small projects funding. The CMC currently has a key role in assessing applications for funding using a standardised process, and with appropriate resourcing is ideally placed to be the body to monitor the outcomes of local projects. The local catchment committee has the intimate knowledge of the physical project location, the priority of the issue, the appropriateness of the proposed methods for that site, and the ability of the applicant to successfully complete the project. The importance and strength of this local assessment should not be underestimated.

#### Implementation:

As stated previously, the demonstrated key to successful implementation of improved natural resource management practices is the ownership of the local community. In this age of “information overload” we can inform the community endlessly and wonder why nothing changes, or we can genuinely involve the community in the process and give them the capacity to understand what’s needed, and the inspiration to put it into action. This is the strength of catchment based community committees. As peers in the local community, particularly rural communities, committee members are more effective at communicating with locals than any regional, state or federal body, and as such these organisations should work with and through the local CMC to consult and involve the community.

#### Coordination and Cooperation:

Originally formed under the motto “Community and government working together”, CMCs primary functions were to coordinate natural resource management planning and implementation on physical catchment basis, and to consult and involve the community in this natural resource management. Their formation was in response to the realization that NREM issues were being researched and addressed by a number of state agencies, local government and community groups, and that poor communication between these groups was resulting in overlapping and repetition of activities.

By providing an open, independent and local forum, CMC’s are highly effective at coordinating the activities of these groups, and concurrently informing and empowering the community to assist and adopt best management practices on the ground. Without CMC’s, this forum is lost, and regional or cross catchment committees will be unable to effectively fulfill this role.

CMC’s have always maintained semi-formal cross catchment alliances, in particular where efficiencies can be gained by working on joint projects. These alliances should be encouraged, but not formalised through a rationalisation process which would remove the local focus from the committee.

The existing regional organisation, the North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee, which consists of the Coordinators and Chairs of the constituent CMCs and coordinates catchment management activities across the North Coast, should remain active.

The primary benefit of coordination of activities between agencies, councils and the community is the level of cooperation which results. As stated previously, Brunswick CMC has a close, cooperative relationship with all levels of government and its community. These groups are brought together to undertake collaborative projects, both research and on ground activities. Each collaborative effort is synergistic, in that the outcomes of these enterprises can be proven to be greater than the combined input of each player. These collaborative projects are designed and implemented in an atmosphere of cooperation and support provided by the CMC, which is the committee's true strength and the basis of its ongoing success.

### **Conclusions:**

The NSW State Government has recently established a plethora of Committees associated with Natural Resource Environmental Management, including committees for developing Vegetation, Water, Estuary, Floodplain and other Management Plans. While the BCMC supports the inclusion of the community in the development of these Plans, it is considered that community involvement could be more effectively achieved using the existing Catchment Management Committees.

Brunswick Catchment Management Committee and the Brunswick Catchment community are committed to the ongoing quest for balanced, sustainable land use management in our catchment. We believe that the CMC is the most effective and appropriate method for implementing this, and would be delighted to see CMCs in effect across the nation. We believe it is important that any structure:

- take into consideration the differing needs of urban, rural and coastal catchments,
- maintain a strong, local, catchment based focus,
- have the support of all natural resource management agencies, and
- be properly resourced to achieve quality outcomes.

If Brunswick CMC can be of any further assistance to this inquiry, please contact the Chairperson, Ros Elliott on (02) 66845428, email [ikingston@peg.org.au](mailto:ikingston@peg.org.au), or the Coordinator, Bronwen Eady on (02)66725488, email [tcmtwdbrun@better.net.au](mailto:tcmtwdbrun@better.net.au).