
Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Environment and Heritage

INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Submission prepared by

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Main points of the submission

- ⇒ Priority catchments and sub-catchments are not always correctly identified in plans and subsequent actions.
- ⇒ Catchment planning is essential to environmental management.
- ⇒ Best practice is not always followed due to issues such as land ownership and management, financial constraints, and the need to harness community enthusiasm in areas not necessarily an environmental priority.
- ⇒ The role of the Federal and Victorian State Government appears to be mostly setting policy and providing funding, whilst relying on Local Government and community groups to facilitate and carry out onground activity in a effort to protect and enhance the environment.
- ⇒ There appears to be a lack of coordination between planning and environment departments in all sectors of government.
- ⇒ Monitoring is not happening as much as it needs to for thorough 'state of the environment' reporting at a useable local level.

Background

To give context to this submission, the following information is provided regarding the environmental values of the Shire of Nillumbik, and in particular the current role of Nillumbik Shire Council and its staff.

The Shire of Nillumbik is located on the urban/rural fringe, 25 kilometres north east of Melbourne's central business district area. The Shire was created in 1994 as a 'Green Wedge' municipality, and is distinguished by a diverse mix of urban and non urban uses, extensive tree cover, interlinked areas of high fauna and habitat significance and undulating topography. The Shire boundaries include the Yarra and Plenty Rivers and the Kinglake Ranges, which contain an urban area in the south-east corner, a number of small, rural towns and a substantial rural area. It is one of the largest metropolitan municipalities, with an area of 430 square kilometres.

Nillumbik has a highly attractive landscape with picturesque river valleys and striking views from many elevated ridge lines. It has a long Aboriginal and European history, the latter commencing with farming and gold mining, a strong heritage in arts and environmental responsibility, and is recognised for its artists and mud brick buildings.

Nillumbik Shire Council has a long history of preserving and managing its significant environmental values through the support of environmental groups and the encouragement of sustainable land management practices.

The Shire of Nillumbik is encompassed in the catchment of the Yarra River. The Shire includes the whole sub-catchments of the Diamond Creek and the Watsons Creek, and a portion of the Plenty River sub-catchment. The Diamond Creek runs diagonally through the Shire, has played a major role in its history, and is a significant focus for conservation, recreation and transportation. The Watsons Creek is located east of the Diamond Creek, and is a vital waterway running through some of the most environmentally significant areas in the Shire. The Diamond Creek and the Plenty River have recently been the focus of sub-catchment plans by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

Information regarding the 'health' of the Watsons Creek catchment is limited, therefore Council has funded the development of a catchment management plan to guide its environmental programs and projects.

Nillumbik Shire Council's environmental activities can be discussed in two areas; private land and public (primarily Council) land. Private landholders are provided with advice and incentives to sustainably manage their land and its environmental and agricultural values. The Sustainable Agricultural Rebate provides residents with funding to continue those land management practices which saw them receive the rebate such as the protection of remnant vegetation and/or weed control.

Incentive programs regularly run by Council for residents include a Community Rabbit Control Program. This program is site specific, focussing on areas of environmental significance and community action. If residents can show that they are willing to work together to control their rabbits Council will assist in organising a program and provide subsidies.

A majority of the incentives Council provides are in relation to the control of weeds. The annual Community Weed Control Program has occurred for four years and includes seven major weeds in the Shire. Each year over 100 landholders participate in the program and receive a subsidy for the control work undertaken by a Council appointed professional contractor. This program has been the focus of an evaluation process using funding from the State Government's Weed Initiative grants program. The findings of this study helped Council to improve the program for the 1998/99 season. Other programs partly funded by successful grant applications have included an annual Paterson's Curse and Serrated Tussock Control Programs.

Nillumbik Shire Council shows commitment to the Landcare groups in the Shire by providing support, materials, technology, technical advice and funding for weed control and other projects such as the Landcare Centre in Hurstbridge. Community training sessions and participation in the Waterwatch program are subsidised and organised by staff, and provide Landcare members with a chance to improve their skills and monitor the results of their environmental protection and enhancement activities. One of the major projects Council is currently assisting with is the North Warrandyte Osborne Peninsula Landcare group's Natural Heritage Trust project involving the restoration and protection of habitat links along the Watsons Creek between Warrandyte and Kinglake.

Environmental works on Council land involves ongoing management and the facilitation of 'Friends of ' groups. The groups are provided with materials, advice, weed control, fencing, plants, revegetation, and training programs such as those run by Council and Greening Australia. Council has an Environmental Works Trailer which can be borrowed by groups and contains tools, a weed identification kit, and the Waterwatch Kit on request. This section of Nillumbik Shire Council is currently developing a monitoring system of restoration works to determine the most appropriate and successful methods used. Council is currently hosting a Green Corps group who are focussing their efforts on the Diamond Creek sub-catchment.

Nillumbik Shire Council has recently acquired 140 hectares of bushland in Panton Hill from Melbourne Water. The management of this land has included the formation of a committee of management facilitated by Council and the preparation of a work plan. The findings of the Watsons Creek Catchment Management Plan will assist Council in minimising the negative impacts of land use surrounding the reserve system.

The development of catchment management in Australia.

Whilst in our region there are numerous State, Regional, Catchment and Sub-catchment plans there is a distinct lack of follow up and monitoring of these documents. The Shire of Nillumbik comes under the Port Phillip and Western Port Regional Catchment Strategy, Yarra Catchment Action Plan, and the Diamond Creek, Plenty River and Watsons Creek Sub-catchment Plans. The priority sub-catchments identified are sometimes incorrect due to the fact that they tend to be highly modified catchments rather than those less modified requiring minimal works.

An example of this is that Nillumbik Shire Council has recently commissioned WBM Oceanics to prepare a Watsons Creek Catchment Management Plan. Council chose to fund the plan because staff felt they did not know enough about the health of the catchment, and because the sub-catchment was not a priority in state government strategies. In addition, the plan was funded to find out about the catchment in which Council had just purchased 140 hectares of bushland from Melbourne Water. In the case of the Watsons Creek sub-catchment a little effort will go a long way to protecting the significant environmental values of the area.

Resources for catchment management in Victoria are already stretched at both state and local level. Competition for funding from grant sources and organisation budgets places greater strain on the financial and human resources involved in catchment management. As a consequence it is vital that those resources are used in the most strategic locations, resulting in sustainable long term outcomes. The management of unmodified catchments may avoid longer term, and potentially costly impacts caused by threatening processes.

Recommendation:

- Catchments and sub-catchments should be prioritised according to environmental values and the level of protection necessary to maintain and enhance those values. Those catchments requiring the least amount of time and resources should be first priority for all stake holders.

The value of a catchment approach to the management of the environment.

This statement needs to be reinforced to everyone involved in catchment management, strategy development and planning. Catchment management should include looking at whole catchments and associated issues, and not just hydrological systems. The impacts of land use and private and public land management practices are vital to the health of a catchment. All land managers should be notified of major studies being undertaken and be part of information dissemination for the region.

The problem with a catchment management approach is on the organisational level. With many different land managers, different understandings of responsibilities and varying financial constraints, organising and encouraging the protection and enhancement of a catchments environmental values can be highly complicated. To overcome such difficulties in Warrandyte, Nillumbik Shire Council facilitated the formation of a land managers group including all state government agencies, community groups and councils. Improved communication and a chance to organise works together have benefited all involved.

The Port Phillip Catchment and Land Protection Board and the YarraCare working group have recently finalised the Yarra Catchment Action Plan 1999. Nillumbik Shire Council is one of only four municipalities on the Yarra Catchment Implementation Committee. The Yarra Catchment Action Plan provides a detailed strategy for improving the health of the Yarra River and its major tributaries.

Lack of resources are a major impediment for implementation and monitoring of the Yarra Catchment Action Plan. This is compounded by the fact that the Catchment and Land Protection Board does not receive a revenue base unlike the Catchment Management Authorities. Following recommendations made in the Yarra Catchment Action Plan, local action programs were developed for the priority sub-catchments, two of which occur in the Shire of Nillumbik including the Diamond Creek and the Plenty River. These Action Programs are a valuable resource but with the current lack of funding and support from agencies in general, the implementation of the recommendations made in these reports will be at best patchy, if at all.

Recommendation:

- Environmental management by agencies should be coordinated, funded monitored and on a catchment basis.

<p>Best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchment, and achieving environmental sustainability.</p>

The development of best practice methods for catchment management is not easy when enthusiasm is pitted against environmental priorities. The reliance of the government on volunteers has seen areas of land degradation improved, but sometimes this work has occurred where the groups want to be, not where they should ideally be working. Locations for restoration should really be based on strategic planning completed for the sub-catchments. For instance Council has a number of 'Friends of' groups working along the Diamond Creek. Some of the groups are working in strategic locations while others are working in their backyard and the environment would be better served if they joined another group just a few kilometres along.

Ideally, all works undertaken in catchments would involve the total protection and enhancement of the headwaters and work down. In Nillumbik Shire Council's case extensive environmental works are occurring along the lower sections of the Diamond Creek, while the Crown land in the upper section is infested with blackberries and (as far as we are aware) is not being controlled, thus undermining the efforts of Council and volunteers.

Recommendation:

- Volunteer efforts should be preferably be focussed on strategically identified priorities.

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

From Council's perspective the Federal Government's role in catchment management appears to include the development of national policy and the provision of funding opportunities such as the Natural Heritage Trust.

The State Government Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) has gradually been downsized thus withdrawing services to the community and a devolution of responsibilities towards Local Government and volunteers. The legislation for which they are responsible for is not being enforced with Ministers preferring to educate. Enforcement and education go hand in hand, particularly when it involves the control and/or eradication of noxious weed species. Management of crown land by NRE does not meet the requirements of the Acts which they are required to enforce. This also includes other state government agencies such as Melbourne Water and the Public Transport Corporation. Council receives regular requests to chase up these agencies regarding weed and vermin infestations. Some agencies appear to be shifting towards a corporate focus involving the development of policy and providing funding to Local Government and community groups. This direction has distracted these agencies from their land management responsibilities.

The State Government Department of Infrastructure is responsible for land use planning, but tends to focus on an urban/metropolitan issues. There is limited integration between land use and natural resource management. This is historic of planning departments in Victoria, including the minimal coordination with other state government departments such as NRE. In general, there appears to be a distinct lack of environmental knowledge in relation to planning matters and vice versa. This may be due to the curriculum set for planning and environmental undergraduate degrees. There needs to be clear integration between planning and environment at all levels.

The role of private industry in catchment management is limited in the Shire of Nillumbik. With a lack of industry, the ability for environment groups to obtain corporate sponsorship (other than Council) is limited. A possible alternative would be for major private industry to give money to a trust which is then distributed to environmentally threatened areas throughout the state or nation.

In recent years there has been a distinct trend towards relying on community volunteers to implement environmental projects, whilst agency staff decline in numbers. The preparation of funding applications and the implementation of projects often requires extensive knowledge, time and effort (eg. Natural Heritage Trust). On many occasions Nillumbik Shire Council has helped groups to complete applications and assisted in their implementation. Grants are only available to incorporated groups, therefore missing the people not in groups who potentially need more assistance in protecting their land and practising

sustainable management practices. Also the non-agricultural sector (conservation groups) do not appear to receive as much funding.

In the Shire of Nillumbik there is a wide variety of environmental groups ranging from the Arthurs Creek Landcare group who are primarily agricultural to the Bend of Islands Conservation Association who are purely focussed on conservation of bushland. In terms of planning and resources the first group has been given much support. Groups focussed on maintaining the natural environmental values of an area should ideally be given priority to receive financial assistance due to the guaranteed maximum return for little effort. At present most of the money goes to degraded areas which require lots of assistance for very long term gain.

Recommendation:

- Increased enforcement of legislation by State Government Agencies, particularly in relation to noxious weed and vermin control.
- The State Government Agencies should be strengthened with realistic numbers of staff, boundaries in which to work in, and budget allocation.
- Less reliance on the community. Easier mechanisms and support for residents to be active if they wish.

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

Agencies do not appear to be driving the implementation or coordination of catchment management plans. Although committees and authorities exist, Council does not seem to receive direction in implementing these strategies. The role of agencies should be to provide guidance at a regional level, whilst local government, in conjunction with agencies, provide implementation at a local level.

Although Council is a member of various committees, in general these committees do not appear to have any funding behind them to offer financial assistance to implement them. Resourcing then is left to the individual Council or group which proves often to be a slow process.

Recommendation:

- Greater coordination of plans by State Government agencies.

Mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on catchment management programs, including the use of these reports for state of the environment reporting, and opportunities for review and improvement.

At present Council is driving monitoring of the environment in the Shire of Nillumbik. To determine the 'health' of catchments we have funded the Waterwatch program (in conjunction with Melbourne Water), and a Watsons Creek Catchment Management Plan. If monitoring is occurring by state government agencies, Council is largely unaware of it. As the Shire of Nillumbik is within the catchment of the Yarra River, reporting of monitoring activities by all agencies should be the responsibility of the Catchment and Land Protection Board for Port Phillip. The monitoring processes and results should be done in conjunction with all stake holders, with the results being forwarded as 'State of

the Environment Reports' on a regular basis. Much effort is being put into environmental issues by both the community and Council and this kind of feedback would be invaluable and may stop degrading processes from taking hold.

Recommendation:

- Formal 'state of the environment' monitoring programs and associated avenues for communication be established.