

M.O.S.E.S.

76 Church St
Windsor 2756

Ph/Fax (02) 4577 4078

25th July, 1999.

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Environment
and Heritage,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA, ACT 2600.

Inquiry into Catchment Management

Our Organisation

We are an environment group with a strong interest in the health of the Hawkesbury/Nepean River and its catchment.

We were intimately involved with many others in the environment movement to get the NSW State Government to do something about the fast-depreciating quality of the River and its catchment during 1991 & 1992. The result of those efforts was the establishment of the Hawkesbury/Nepean Catchment Management Trust (HNCMT) in 1993 under the Catchment Management Act of NSW 1989.

Our Chairman was a member of the Community Consultative Council of the HNCMT from its inception to its (the Council's) disbanding in 1997. He has recently been appointed a Trustee of the HNCMT. This gives us a clear insight into its operations, its successes and its failures.

Overview

It is now six years since the establishment of the Hawkesbury/Nepean Catchment Management Trust and we feel that the results of Total Catchment Management (TCM) to date have been disappointing.

TCM currently costs around \$4,000,000 per year to run in the Hawkesbury/Nepean Catchment and has probably cost in excess of \$20,000,000 over the last six years. Are we getting results proportional to the cost ? Are the results we are getting what are necessary ? Is the TCM process working in the Hawkesbury/Nepean Catchment ?

To these questions we would have to give a very qualified yes/no, well maybe some of the time.

What we had hoped for:

Leadership

A strong and vibrant leader in all matters affecting the River and its Catchment.

Advocacy

Championship of the interests of the River system in all decision-making forums. A demonstrated will to fight and fight hard for the River.

Accountability

A preparedness to accept that this is where "the buck stops".

Profile

Broad community recognition and acceptance.

Arising out of these values we would by now have expected to have seen:

- the start of a steady improvement in water quality,
- a rolling-back of unsustainable land uses, e.g. instream extraction.
- tens of kilometers of re-vegetated river banks,
- action on air quality problems,
- strong and consistent controls over land filling and excavation on the flood plain,
- an agreed, and partially implemented, flood hazard control plan,
- a strong Regional Environment Plan,
- an agreed, and partially implemented, stormwater management plan,
- etc., etc., etc,

How Total Catchment Management has Performed

The kindest thing that could be said for Total Catchment Management (TCM) to date is that it has created no enemies. Our overall impression is one of blandness, compromise and low public profile.

We would agree that the HNCMT has produced some excellent guidelines, e.g. the State of the Environment Reporting Guidelines. It has also produced some excellent planning documents, e.g. the Erosion and Sediment Control Plans. However this is all administrative and without implementation powers can have little direct benefit for the Catchment.

Wherever we look we see things being done which are nice and warm and soft, (e.g. the Phosphorus Action programme, largely a publicity exercise) with which no-one could disagree, but which have very little measurable result on the ground.

The problem is that we can see so little happening in the real world which would not have happened had the HNCMT never been established !

Problem Areas:

The central problem seems to be in the very nature of TCM as defined in the Catchment Management Act. Our understanding is that it was designed around rural catchments with small populations, a very limited number of players and clearly defined problems. Such is just not the case with the Hawkesbury/Nepean Catchment.

To work at all TCM requires a level of trust and cooperation which is never likely to be achieved in a catchment as diverse as the Hawkesbury/Nepean.

Under TCM the HNCMT has no powers to ensure the implementation of its policies. It must rely on the goodwill and cooperation of Local Government and the various State Government agencies involved. It would be fair to say that there is little evidence of lack of goodwill but there is plenty of evidence for the positions of the HNCMT being either ignored, misunderstood or not even known about.

The HNCMT has a very narrow focus. Indicative of this is that despite the fact that its Regulation states that the Trust is to foster "orderly and proper, socio-economic planning and management as the basis of the well-being of the people .." the Trust has refused to consider the health and well-being of the people, for example, in relation to the Badgerys Creek Airport proposal. On this project it refused to become involved in anything other than eco-system issues.

The whole Catchment Management process has been set up around representation in the membership of its governing bodies rather than merit. There is a need for expert objectivity and not partisanship. Thus there should be no room for bureaucrats solely representing the interests of their various departments. Nor, for example, for Local Government representatives operating purely as representatives. If anyone from such backgrounds can bring expert objectivity to bear then they should be welcomed, but they should be chosen for their expertise and not their representativeness.

We have a sneaking suspicion that the whole TCM process has been deliberately designed by the bureaucracy to 'keep the public out of their hair' while they get on with, what they perceive, as their God-given task of running this State. Maybe this is just our paranoia, a good foul-up beats a conspiracy most times !

Changes needed:

We believe that the HNCMT needs to, at the very least,:

- have control over the preparation and content of the Regional Environmental Plan, SREP 20, extended to apply to the whole of the Catchment (in the same way that Local Governments have control over their Local Environment Plans),
- have the power to define designated and/or classified developments (under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act of NSW) within the Catchment,
- have a concurrence power over the release of lands to urban development,
- have established for it a clear precedence of Regional Plans over Local Environment Plans,
- have the power, through compliance audits, to direct both public and private bodies to comply with its directions,
- have a clear right of consultation with all government agencies on all matters affecting the Catchment,
- have the control and direction of the Flood Management process within the Catchment,

- have control and direction of the Stormwater management process within the Catchment,
- have a final determining say on all extractions of water,
- have a concurrence power over the extraction of all materials from both the riverbed and the floodplain,
- have the powers to become closely involved in all air quality plans,
- have the clear power to be able to foster the health and well-being of all people living within the Catchment,
- have a clearly identified and dedicated funding stream appropriate to its requirements (we have suggested a small levy on all extractions of water from the River System, including Sydney Water extractions).

Conclusion:

Nothing we propose is new. TCM is not giving the return on its costs which we believe is necessary. The environment movement accepted TCM as the vehicle to deliver catchment management under political pressure from the then Government of NSW to take it or risk getting nothing. We have given it a good go but it just is not working out as we had hoped.

Above all else we are impatient to start seeing results on the ground and in the water and in the air !

There has to be a better way.

Movement Opposing Senseless Environmental Sacrilege

John P. Murphy, Chairman