

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

**Inquiry into**

**Catchment Management**

**A submission from**

**The Australian Association of Natural Resource Management  
(AANRM)**

**Key points**

This submission has been divided into the following significant issues facing catchment management in Australia. The AANRM submission raises the need for:

- Involvement of Local Government;
- Social and Institutional change;
- Need for targets and trade-offs;
- Prioritised action; and
- Accountability for action.

## **1.0 Background to the Australian Association of Natural Resource Management (AANRM):**

This organisation represents the former Soil and Water Conservation Association of Australia (SAWCAA). The name change was made on the basis that there was a need to highlight a move away from the single management aspects associated with soil and water issues.

The organisation has approximately 950 members across Australia that are divided into Corporate members, Individual members and student members. Individual branches are operating in NSW, SA, Queensland and Victoria.

The purpose of AANRM is to:

- Provide an independent forum for stimulating debate in natural resource management; and
- Encourage the adoption of systems of natural resource management that are in accordance with the capability of those resources.

AANRM's mission is to:

- Provide leadership in natural resource management;
- Facilitate networking amongst all natural resource managers;
- Provide a focus on all aspects of our natural resources;
- Provide practical information in a user-friendly format; and
- Provide a focus that will be attractive to all natural resource managers and concerned individuals.

## **2.0 Rationale for responding to this Inquiry into catchment management:**

The use of catchments as a basis for resource management has been accepted and adopted by many AANRM members. AANRM members represent advocates for natural resource management and promote the need to adopt a more holistic approach to the management of our resources. A majority of AANRM members also have considerable experience in adapting to and working within the parameters provided by catchments. A large number of AANRM members have been and still are actively involved in catchment based action since the inception of catchment management in the mid to late 1980's.

This submission has been divided into the following significant issues facing catchment management in Australia:

- Involvement of Local Government;
- Social and Institutional change;
- Need for targets and trade-offs;
- Prioritised action; and
- Accountability for action.

### 3.0 Involvement of Local Government

Catchments have been recognised for over 35 years as the basic unit for dryland salinity management. In the late 1950's the Eppalock project driven by the need for soil conservation was a world leader in integrated catchment management. Since the 1980s this concept has developed further to embrace all forms of natural resource management.

A wide range of approaches have been adopted to handle catchment management issues, with each State adopting its own peculiar variations. On the whole these variations have reflected the respective political power exerted by various State Departments rather than an holistic approach to natural resource management. For example in 1987 when NSW started to embrace a Total Catchment Management policy it had already, or was in the process of developing, State Policies for Soils, Trees, River Estuaries, Groundwater, Water Quality, Coasts, Coastal Crown Lands, Crown Land Foreshore Tenures, Coastal Wetlands, Forest Management, and Floods. TCM was intended to form an umbrella for all, but still distinctly separate, natural resource management issues.

Local Government was encouraged to be represented in this process, together with State Departments and the Community. **However LGA boundaries frequently bear little relationship to natural physiographic units.** On the whole they owe their historical boundaries to urban developments supporting a range of primary and secondary industries rather than to any particular landscape feature. Also, until relatively recently Local Government had very little enforceable responsibility for environmental matters. Roads, rates and rubbish were very much the core issues.

However with the emerging pressures of community driven catchment management plans Local Government has itself had to become involved in that philosophy. In some instances the association was seen as being beneficial to Local Government in others it was seen as threat by the 'greenies' of the community.

Thankfully that attitude is changing and the change is being assisted by State government regulations requiring Local Government to prepare environmental audits and monitor environmental conditions within their jurisdiction. However even this change of direction has created its own fiscal problems, as Local Government has had to start gathering precisely the same type of information as Catchment Management Committees.

Meantime, Catchment Management Committees have not had an easy evolution. Although few would deny that the basic concept is attractive CMCs still are, with the exception of Victoria, toothless tigers when it comes to achieving catchment wide natural resource management. The Victorian story of Landcare, Group Conservation Areas, Proclaimed Water Supply Catchments and the formation of Catchment Management Authorities has highlighted the need to monitor the health of the catchment and integrate community action within major catchments.

Even with these successful approaches even the Victorian model does not fully integrate Local Government with catchment management.

In NSW CMCs were appointed by the State Government and were initially provided with negligible financial resources. They were intended to be the watchdogs of their respective catchments, to integrate Landcare-type grants, and to stimulate natural resource management education. Over time individual CMCs have been amalgamated into larger units corresponding with larger catchments – thus placing even more demands on the volunteer and Departmental members. No one knows whether this is going to prove to be an effective change or not.

**CMCs still have no real power to make things happen. They can only educate, give advice and, to a very limited degree, fund environmental work.**

A more obvious solution would be for Local Government to make use of CMCs within their environmental functions. For this to happen effectively:

- Local Government boundaries should be more closely aligned with catchments;
- Various State and Commonwealth Departments would need to fund Local Governments for environmental work rather than building a separate layer of environmental pseudo-government; and
- Catchment Management Committees would need to work as an arm of Local Government rather than being beholden to State and Commonwealth Departments. This would reinforce the community-based philosophy that should underpin catchment management.

In the short time available for this Inquiry it has not been possible to obtain maps of all Local Government boundaries (this is a State function and not one automatically handled by the Bureau of Statistics). However if one overlays NSW LGAs on the Murray Darling Basin Catchment Management Regions it shows that each Region contains between 15 and 25 LGAs. Further, LGAs frequently extend in to two, and sometimes three Catchment Management Regions. A prime example is the Lake Cowal catchment area which is governed by four Local Governments.

With the push towards Local Government amalgamations over the last few years it would appear that there is an opportunity to achieve significant results for natural resource management. Certainly the options deserve detailed study before the existing mish-mash of Departmental, Local Government, and Community interactions become too entrenched.

It may be quite impractical to merge all Local Governments into super- catchment areas, some of which also cross-State boundaries. Some of the super-catchments themselves may also be impractical in the sense that they often traverse a wide range of geo-climatic zones. But the principles of Integrated Catchment Management have evolved and matured – it is now time for that to be linked with real regulatory authority and realistic funding.

#### **4.0 Social and Institutional Change**

Catchment planning to date has concentrated on biophysical needs and issues with little acknowledgment or use of “social boundaries”. Whilst this approach was appropriate for the introduction of catchment management, the end result has been a

failure to incorporate and get ownership from the entire catchment community. By not catering for the specific needs and requirements of the catchment community a large percentage of the biophysical research has fallen on deaf ears or community members who have been unable to afford the desired changes to management. Recent studies into the demographics of the land managers in the Murray-Darling Basin indicate that the average age of the Basin land managers is increasing at an alarming rate. Regardless of the excellent technical messages that may be provided as a resource, the failure to incorporate the needs of this increasing older population ultimately means that the likelihood of successful transfer and adoption of these improved management practices is significantly diminished.

Natural resource management and catchment management now needs to incorporate the human dimension. The need to include an understanding of the contexts and parameters that people operate should be mandatory in all research and investigation. Social research can then not only support biophysical but underpin successful adoption of catchment based actions.

The current model provided by the Farming for the Future program and Farm\$mart in Victoria not only are good vehicles for raising catchment issues, but ensure that issues are relevant to the family farm. Farms are the building blocks to a catchment, with these programs emphasising a need to integrate biophysical, economic and social aspects of management. Change will only occur in catchment management if there is a refocussing on the fact that the management of our catchments is about people and the development of trust and relationships. This fact has been lost in a number of the technical programs being undertaken resulting in change at a very slow rate and with no passion or care for the future. The disempowering of landmanagers in the decision making process of government has been highlighted as a real impediment to catchment management.

It is recommended that social and institutional arrangements be incorporated as mandatory data sets in the development of any catchment based activities.

## **5.0 Need for Targets and Trade-offs**

Catchment management to date has not concentrated on assigning specific targets for improved natural resource outcomes. Whilst this can be argued as being acceptable for an activity that is still in its infancy with a focus on increasing awareness, the amount of degradation facing the catchments of Australia demands that natural resource targets are defined on a catchment basis.

The need for agreed targets will require the support of legislation and/or a combination of incentives based funding based on meeting these targets. The success of the Murray-Darling Basin Salinity and Drainage Strategy was largely due to the benchmark of salinity at Morgan. Trade-offs provided by the contributing partners provided a basis for accommodating different management and climatic conditions within the contributing catchments.

Targets will also incorporate issues that are not always restricted to one catchment and surface water issues. One problem with a catchment-based approach is in the area of groundwater management and chemical contamination of water, for example

endosulphan contamination in Northern NSW. Both of these issues fail to adhere to a strict one catchment basis and could be managed if a holistic and end of catchment target used. This begs the question - How has existing catchment management activities catered for cumulative impact?

Targets should not only indicate achievements of actions but should also be linked to a series of indicators that indicate that a threshold is approaching. For example, weeds are evidence of succession and can indicate the progression and/or regression of degradation. Alerting and educating the catchment community to the indicators of catchment health relating to overall targets would represent a significant improvement on the current use of generic and unspecified outcomes.

## **6.0 Prioritised Action**

Linked to a failure in current catchment based activities is a lack of prioritised action. Whilst there is a trend by funding bodies to insist that activities only be funded on priority areas, the lack of agreed targets and monitored progress towards achieving those targets provides a poor basis for mapping out an investment framework by the catchment community and government.

The incorporation of Local Government, social context and agreed targets are all activities that can work together to support a prioritised approach to investment. The catchment communities can then appreciate (if not always accept) that funding has been based on the achieving the best natural resource outcomes and not to satisfy an equity based approach based on partner contributions.

## **7.0 Accountability for action**

In the current catchment management framework there is little accountability for action as a result of lack of supporting legislation (Local Government involvement), lack of acceptance of the issue (failure to capture the social context), lack of agreed targets and failure to allocate resources based on natural resource condition.

To achieve sustainability of Australia's natural resources there will be a need for significant change in land management practice. The adoption of targets will require that all of the catchment community be accountable for their actions in achieving that goal. For too long land degradation has been attributed to the farming population where other members of the community enjoy the spoils of natural resource change. The use of firewood in Canberra (undoubtedly a source of remnant vegetation and protection) highlights this issue, as the same people who accuse the farmers of land degradation do not question the use of this resource for warmth during winter.

If change is to occur then it should occur on a basis of agreed targets with clear lines of responsibility and accountability. The current maze of Local, State and Commonwealth legislation not only is confusing but also means that environmental actions are often put into the too hard basket by developers. This then leads to an attitude of "sue me if you can" rather than "I am willing to contribute". Similarly it is also important that environmental legislation from all levels of government is not "watered down" in favour of development. The ongoing monitoring and technical

rigour of environmental legislation (particularly when a catchment crosses legislative borders) is vital if catchment management is to succeed.

Accountability for action must be shared within the catchment community. The emphasis on informing all members of the community that they are resource users cannot be underestimated.

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