

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE
ON ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE
INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc.
Response to the Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The following response relates to the activities of the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. particularly in relation to its involvement in the Murray Darling initiative and therefore also has direct links to the activities of the Murray Darling Commission business and present and future directions. Whilst observing and being aware of the Terms of Reference provided for this Inquiry, this report essentially addresses the institutional management and partnershiping arrangements between this committee and the communities involved in Integrated Catchment Management in the Murray Darling Basin area of Queensland.

As Chairman to the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc, I, and a number of community members of this committee, have had the benefit of investigations into catchment management institutional arrangements in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. The purpose of these delegations was to assist our committee in progressing the whole concept of catchment management within the Basin area of Queensland. Staff of the Community Program Development area of the Department of Natural Resources also participated in the delegations to South Australia and New South Wales.

BACKGROUND

The Queensland Murray Darling Co-ordinating Committee was established in 1993 as a result of Queensland entering the Murray Darling Basin initiative. The Committee's role has largely to date, been one of co-ordination, particularly in relation to the four catchments of Warrego-Paroo, Maranoa-Balonne, Border Rivers and Condamine.

Particular emphasis has also been placed on planning at both the catchment and regional levels and one of the major tasks and achievements of the Queensland Murray Darling Committee has been the development of the Queensland Murray Darling Natural Resources Management Strategy. This document, for the first time with the stakeholder input, clearly depicts the requirements of the Queensland section of the Murray Darling Basin in relation to natural resources management and identifies 12 major issues as a focus and also introduces 54 strategies that have been developed to address those issues.

Complexity of both the needs of the Basin and therefore the inputs required to address those needs, has initially caused the committee to reconsider the role that it has been undertaking to date and the role required to move to implementation of the strategic plan. In addition, the Community Program Development area of the Department of Natural Resources under the

leadership of Margaret Berenyi, has been looking very closely at the issues of community engagement and community partnership on a State-wide basis.

Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. has been directly involved in this initiative as it is recognised as one of the leading committees progressing the concepts of catchment management within the State. The Committee has recognised that its current method of conducting business and dealing with the issues that it has traditionally dealt with may require review to allow the implementation of the strategic plan, and to ensure a strategic approach is adopted in relation to natural resource management.

Committee members recognise that fundamental issues including the levels of awareness of the concept of catchment management; the actual ownership of the concept within the Basin; and the ability of the Committee and Committee Members to move the concept of catchment management into the “next phase” all require very careful consideration critical to the success of the initiative. The issue of the community actually leading the introduction of the implementation of the Natural Resources strategic plan within the Queensland section of Murray Darling Basin, and therefore the required partnership to meet these needs, is also being scrutinised.

In addition, the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. has also engaged consultants to prepare a business plan to assist with the overall implementation of the strategic plan. The introduction of the business plan moves the actual “operationalisation” of the Natural Resources Strategy a step closer to implementation.

Whilst the business plan and the 3 Year Rolling Business Plan both provide frameworks for the strategic and focused introduction of the strategy, the issue of community leadership and the role of Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. have remained somewhat ambiguous and unresolved. These issues have led to discussions being held at committee level and the suggestion of delegations to other States to investigate the concepts, management and institutional arrangements of catchment management in those States.

THE CONCEPT

Integrated Catchment Management is still a relatively new concept within the Murray Darling Basin area of Queensland as well as for wider stakeholders throughout the State. Within the Murray Darling Basin area of Queensland, four Catchment Management Committees now known as Catchment Management Associations, have been established which include Border Rivers, Condamine, Maranoa-Balonne and the South West Natural Resource Management Group which comprises the Warrego-Paroo Catchment Management Association. Over-arching these four catchment management associations is the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc.

All of these committees are community led and comprise appropriate membership from all levels of Government and from within the community to allow and ensure, as best as possible, that all views in relation to natural resources managements within the area are adequately addressed and dealt with at both the catchment and regional levels.

Having said this, however, due to a number of external influences and pressures, particularly in relation to planning processes, the role and responsibilities of the various catchment management associations and the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. have not

necessarily been adequately articulated and therefore, well understood. Measures have recently been introduced to improve this situation and the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. has initiated initiatives to improve both its business performance and its relationship with the four catchment management associations.

This is an issue that is often overlooked in various planning processes and is not unique to this region. The delegations to other States observed that a very important issue in any of these processes was that the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders must be well orchestrated and understood in the first instance to avoid future possible confusion and friction.

One of the major difficulties we perceive the community facing is the plethora of largely Government introduced committees on which community members are asked to participate. The introduction of catchment management in Queensland in as such is a relatively new concept and follows the introduction of the decade of Landcare and other Natural Resource Management programs and initiatives. This in itself has caused some concerns within the community and a level of friction and frustration between the Landcare movement and the catchment management concept. These concerns are continually being addressed and I feel confident that with the continual on-ground achievements achieved by both initiatives the concerns can be overcome to allow the best results for all stakeholders in the Basin.

It is my contention that there are a number of basic issues that will require immediate attention to allow the overall aims of catchment management to be achieved.

It would be fair to say that within the Basin area of Queensland the awareness of what is known as Integrated Catchment Management is reasonable, however this varies throughout the Basin. One of the real issues facing any partnerships wishing to further enhance the concept is the reality that the ownership of the concept of catchment management within our stakeholders, particularly rural stakeholders, is low.

I would suggest that those who participate within the catchment management authorities and the Landcare movement have varying levels of understanding of the overall concept and therefore the overall aims and achievements of the initiative are not clearly understood or understood at the same levels throughout those communities.

This situation results in the reality that catchment management at the present time lacks a high profile within the community. The challenge for all stakeholders in the appropriate partnershiping arrangements in existence and those that may be forged into the future is to provide the means by which awareness, ownership and therefore the profile of the movement is raised to more significant levels.

An issue that became obvious to those who participated in the Southern States delegations was that in each State there was a focus that brought the community together to address specific issues. For example, the salinity issue in Victoria was 'the hook' by which the community came together to address strategies to deal with this very significant problem. I perceive that this focus is not as obvious within our section of the Basin, and on a wider context throughout the State. I believe this issue has been partly responsible for the difficulty of the concept of catchment management 'finding its feet' in our region.

There is a convincing argument, however, which I am sure would be well supported by all participants, that perhaps weeds, are in fact that hook. However, when the issue of weeds is raised at various levels, both within the Community Advisory Committee and the

Commission, there appears to be little support or available funding to assist in the combat of this natural resource and environmental issue. It would be a change of attitude on issues such as this that I believe would provide the incentive for our constituents to become more involved and have a greater respect for the overall issues being dealt with within Integrated Catchment Management.

Having made the above comments, however, I believe there is strong support for natural resource issues to be dealt with on a catchment and a regional catchment basis. The challenge facing all participants is to develop the necessary supporting means and respected partnerships with all levels of Government to allow the concept to mature and grow.

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The Department of Natural Resources has recognised that there requires a strengthening of community based management arrangements throughout the State. Through the Community Program Development area three pilot dialogue programs are being undertaken to seek community guidance and direction on how best to combine the expertise, knowledge and leadership of all stakeholders in future directions of natural resource management.

The Queensland Murray Darling Committee has volunteered to participate in this exercise and dialogue sessions will be commencing throughout the region during September. These dialogue sessions have recognised that there are a number of issues requiring discussion with our communities and include:-

- Frustration about the rate of progress in developing and implementing natural resource strategies and plans and achieving on-ground outcomes.
- The lack of certainty and continuity in the system of three year funding cycles.
- Increasing community and Government awareness of trends in the conditions of resources.
- The on going expectation of increased community stakeholders in consultation processes, combined with the very real demands (financial and time) associated with these expectations.
- Recognition of the integrated nature and complexity of many natural resource issues.
- The downsizing of Government bureaucracies, with a trend towards local management of natural resources.
- The need to link NRM planning more effectively into the regional frameworks.
- Rapidly growing numbers and types of NRM groups in Queensland, but a declining volunteer base.

Genuine attempts must be made to overcome these issues.

Within Queensland the structure of the Landcare and Catchment Management movement is as follows:-

The Landcare and Catchment Management Council is the peak body. Beneath this are 13 regional strategy groups throughout the State. Within a number of the regional strategy groups are catchment management associations and beneath these organisations are Landcare and interest groups. The following comments are made about each:-

Landcare and Catchment Management Council

- Needs greater exposure in the wider community.
- Linkages to RSG's require strengthening.
- Chairman and Members should be appointed by the Minister following advertisement and should reflect both the demographics of the State and necessary skills to undertake the task being asked of the committee.
- The roles and responsibilities require clear definition which should be well orchestrated to all RSG's and the wider community.

Regional Strategy Groups

- The boundaries, areas of influence and social influences should be reassessed.
- There has always been some contention that these groups were established largely to cater for NHT requirements.
- This has led to a perception in the wider community that catchment management is about NHT funding.
- This is clearly not the case, however, we have a situation almost where we have the 'tail wagging the dog'.
- Regional strategy groups should play strategic roles in association with catchment management associations, however, should also undertake strategic roles to support the activities of all interest groups and catchment management associations.
- Regional strategy groups should be supported by Executive Officers.

Catchment Management Associations

- The existing appointment processes, memberships and structures are considered appropriate, however should be reviewed on a timely basis.
- The roles and responsibilities of all catchment management associations require clear definition to avoid confusion and overlap in relation to regional strategy groups.
- Catchment management associations should be supported by coordinators.
- It is my contention that if coordinators are not made available to the existing catchment management associations, the required outputs expected from the process will NOT be achieved and all the effort and support and resourcing that has been currently provided into the movement could largely be lost.
- An initiative of the South West Region has been the movement to closer alignment of the resource management business of the Department of Natural Resources and each of the catchment management strategies and the Queensland Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource Management strategy objectives.
- This process should go a long way to ensuring that the needs of the natural resource base within the Basin and, therefore, the expectations and concerns of those stakeholders within are both being respected and acted upon in partnerships with responsible agencies.
- The resultant on-ground achievements will definitely enhance the acceptance and ownership of the aims of the concept of catchment management.

Overall Comment

In the structure of all committees the issue of skills vs geographic, or the combination of both, requires due consideration.

REMUNERATION

The investigations into Southern States all revealed that the majority of community participants within the catchment management movement in those States are remunerated either via honorariums or via sitting fees. Whilst there is some remuneration to the more senior committees (i.e. LCMC) apart from reasonable travelling and accommodation costs, community members participating in the movement are not remunerated to date.

This has been an ongoing issue for community members and whilst members of the community have been saying that their continued participation may be in doubt because of this issue, I have no doubt that because of the economic and social climate that prevails within our region, unless this matter is addressed we will definitely find that the willingness and ability of community people to continue to participate in the movement will decline. Difficulties in maintaining community participation are already evident.

Unfortunately, within the Basin there is still a perception in certain areas that the catchment management movement is a top down exercise and, further that it is very much a former DPI, now Department of Natural Resources, initiative. The challenge we face as stakeholders is to ensure and enhance the overall aim of the movement and that is that it is a community led and very much a community participatory and owned movement.

Commensurate with this desire of course is the fact that the requirements and demands being placed on our community members are continually increasing and the call by Government for them to participate is now something that has emerged as a very big issue for our community participants.

Whilst it has been suggested to me that enhanced remuneration for community participants' activities within the movement will reduce the overall funding available for on-ground activities, I believe it is absolutely essential that those people who are willing to provide their time and expertise into the movement to ensure the overall aims are achieved, have to be recognised and respected.

FUTURE RESPONSIBILITIES OF COMMUNITIES

I believe there is still some doubt within our communities about the roles and responsibilities being asked of them within the movement. Serious consultation requires undertaking by all stakeholders to ascertain the 'level' of authority in relation to natural resources management committees wish to take responsibility for.

It is my contention that communities within the Basin are confused and frustrated by the number of committees and organisations within their areas and that the level of consultation being asked of them has gone past what could be described as a 'reasonable thing'. It is also my contention, however, that the communities would rather be involved in natural resource issues on the basis of being invited to participate at the start of a process, rather than being invited to participate in a process after governments have determined the direction of that process.

If this was allowed to emerge, the overall partnership between Government and our communities could be substantially enhanced and the difficult decisions that remain before us would be resolved as a partnership with the community standing beside the relevant departmental officers and Ministers when these tough decisions were required to be made.

I also believe Governments generally overlook the fact that for many years in this State, Government simply made decisions without substantial input from communities. Over about the last decade this situation has changed and governments are now seeking input into many of the natural resource issues they are required to deal with.

This is a real challenge for communities as they are faced with a situation of either not understanding why they are being asked to participate, and when they do, not having the required numbers, skills or capacity to communicate effectively to allow their voice to be carried through to the decision making period.

In my view overall, this leads to the issue of the required partnership between Government and community and whilst there have been genuine attempts to establish this partnership I would suggest that a genuine review of this topic is required. It may be the initiatives from the Community Program Development area of the Department of Natural Resources go a long way in resolving this situation, however, there has to be a genuine commitment and realisation that any resultant process may result in changes in roles and responsibilities of both community and institutional participants.

LEADERSHIP

Community leadership is an exercise in its own right as we find that it is the same people with the necessary skills being asked to participate on the plethora of committees that presently exist.

The Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. should promote and assist community members to enhance their ability to participate, whilst respecting their levels of participation presently, and should assist community participants to participate in leadership or personal development and/or business skills processes. It is my view that there are many members within our communities with the potential to both participate and lead the movement, however, because of their perception that they do not have the required skills they choose not to.

These leadership skills should be recognised in any remuneration processes.

During the deputations to Southern States the issue of leadership was raised in every State and it was obvious to our delegates that the quality and dedication of the leaders of natural resource management organisations in those States was a reflection of both their desire to be involved and the remuneration that is made available to them for their involvement.

These comments, however, do not detract at all from those members of our community presently participating within the catchment movement within this region. The comments are made, however, to raise the issue that community members are now vastly stretched both financially and time-wise in the tasks being asked of them and incentives to ensure their participating in this very important movement are recognised and respected.

LEGISLATION

In the States visited, legislation underpins the catchment management movement in all. Whilst there are a number of Acts that impact on resource management in this State there is no one Act that enshrines catchment management as the business of Government. I would suggest that the issue of enabling legislation be considered to underpin catchment management in the State to –

- i. Obtain recognition of Government that catchment management is, in fact, ‘core business’ of Government and that all Departments involved with resource management have a responsibility to participate in that core business; and
- ii. Raise the community profile and respect of the movement as it would give some certainty to the long term aims and visions of the movement.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There is no doubt that the involvement of Local Government in the catchment management movement within this region has been a challenge to all concerned. My perception is that Local Governments are, in areas, confused by the actions of the various natural resource management groups within the area and are finding it difficult on how best to become involved. In addition, I also believe that Local Government views the catchment management with some scepticism and in fact, in some areas, as a threat to their activities. An awareness/education program is required at a local, regional and the State level to ensure that Local Governments are made aware and are involved in all aspects of the activities of Integrated Catchment Management initiatives.

One consideration could be given to the co-alignment of Local Government, catchment and, where relevant, agency boundaries to enhance natural resources management. Whilst I recognise this is a big challenge the investigations in Southern States have revealed that where the opportunity to co-align Local Government and catchment boundaries was not adopted, we were advised that in hindsight those involved recognise this was an opportunity missed.

OVERALL FUNDING

As previously mentioned, there is a perception amongst the community that catchment management largely revolves around NHT funding and furthermore, Government Departments are largely the beneficiaries of this funding. The Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. should initiate a program of exploring opportunities for greater corporate sponsorship for natural resource management and on-ground activities. An example of this has been the success of the Great Artesian Basin Advisory Committee in obtaining the support of BHP in the ‘adopting a bore’ program where that company adopts an artesian bore and rehabilitates bores on an ongoing basis.

OVERALL COMMENT

As stated previously this report essentially deals with institutional arrangements associated with Integrated Catchment Management within this area of the State. In making the above comments I recognise the contribution of all levels of Government and the community in the management of natural resources to date. The difficulty, of course, is enhancing the existing partnerships with all stakeholders without the creation of what may be perceived to be further bureaucracies.

Having had the opportunity to investigate catchment management arrangements in other States, I would suggest that the difficulties facing Queensland are unique to all those States. I believe that although Queensland has only been involved in the catchment management movement for a relatively short time, considerable milestones have been achieved and that as a State, although there is a perception that other States are well advanced in relation to Queensland's position, we are in fact well positioned to review our performance and enhance the whole concept and movement of catchment management both within our Basin and throughout the State.

There is no doubt all stakeholders within our region face considerable challenges relating to natural resources management, however, I believe with the continuing maturing of the various committees established, the establishment of the appropriate partnerships required, and the provision of enabling support for community members' involvement, there is a very real opportunity of shaping the future directions of natural resources management within our region for the betterment of all concerned.

Malcolm Topp
CHAIRMAN
QUEENSLAND MURRAY DARLING COMMITTEE INC.