

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Inquiry into catchment management A Submission by the North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee

Issue

This submission is in response to a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage inquiry into catchment management.

Background

The North Coast NSW natural resource and environment region covers an area of approximately 63,000 square kilometres extending for more than 700 kilometres from the Queensland border in the north to Port Stephens in the south. It has eleven catchment areas - Tweed, Brunswick, Richmond, Clarence, Coffs Harbour Waterways, Bellinger, Nambucca, Macleay, Hastings Camden Haven, Manning and Karuah Great Lakes.

A majority of the necessary or urgent environment repair for the region arises from the fact that the North Coast is the fastest growing region in NSW. Around 650,000 people live in the region (see appendix 1). In the 5 years between 1986 and 1991 it expanded almost twice as quickly as any other area. While the average growth rate for the Sydney region was 1.13% for the North Coast it was 3.22%. This population pressure puts large demands on the natural resources and environment.

The North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee (NCCCC) was established in 1993 as an informal affiliation of the 11 Catchment Management Committees (CMCs) established under the NSW Catchment Management Act.

Its initial foci was to: discuss issues of common concern; provide a more effective lobby to State Government about these issues; and provide support and coordination to Catchment Management Committees for their activities.

In 1997 the North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee was selected by both the Federal and State Governments as the 'regional organisation' to prepare a regional natural resource and environment management strategy, a series of action plans and annual funding bids under the auspices of the Natural Heritage Trust. This was as recognition for the successful regionally based community natural resource and environment planning model established by NCCCC on the North Coast.

Being given the responsibility for preparation of these plans meant that the focus of the Committee moved from a position of basically internal coordination to the challenges of coordinating regional natural resource and environment management, developing a framework which incorporated other regional plans and planning and cooperatively identifying project opportunities for external funding and investment.

The intent of the NCCCC identified in our Business Plan has been to:

- coordinate sustainable natural resource management on the North Coast
- influence natural resource management and funding allocation on the North Coast
- provide leadership for natural resource management
- provide information via networking
- provide investment via funding bodies

We want to:

- guide the sustainable natural resource management agenda
- engender regional attitudinal change towards sustainability
- provide a forum for debate and exploration of issues
- add value to other organisations planning and activities

Terms of Reference

The important point to stress is that there is an existing model in NSW which is successfully addressing these terms of reference.

Development of catchment management in Australia

Catchment Management Committees (CMCs) in NSW were established under the Catchment Management Act 1989 as part of the Total Catchment Management (TCM) program, which operates under the banner "community and government working together".

The North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee and its constituent CMCs have made considerable progress in the development of catchment management at both the regional and catchment levels in this time. It has been particularly successful in developing partnerships between the community and state and local government agencies responsible for natural resource and environment management.

It has established and maintained a process of local community input into government policies, cost effective delivery of community consultation, coordination of resources to priority issues and projects and facilitating on ground change.

Value of catchment approach to management of the environment

The TCM program was established in recognition of the fact that the majority of natural resource and environment issues ultimately manifest themselves in some form of impact on our rivers, wetlands and lakes.

The success of a Catchment Management approach is that it has both a process and philosophical base to its application.

The process of 'community and government working together' has allowed for the development of true partnerships which have the potential value of:

- Establishing a simplified, coordinated, easily understood structure for the delivery of integrated regional Natural Resource and Environment Management
- Delivering clear, uniform and integrated planning
- Allocating funding efficiently
- Instilling ownership of and commitment to NREM by all levels of government and all government NREM agencies
- Providing a high level of coordination within and between regions and across the State
- Delivering plans aligned to appropriate natural resource boundaries.

Catchments are logical planning units when dealing with natural resources and the environment. Land, water and biodiversity issues cannot be effectively dealt with in isolation because of the interrelationships between them, and this is why the catchment approach to management of the environment has been successful. The TCM process ensures that the 'down river' effect of actions are taken into account.

The catchment approach also recognises that environmental issues can not be removed from the economic and social implications. The Regional Strategy for the North Coast examines environmental issues for these 3 perspective's.

The other major value of a catchment approach is the sense of active community participation and local ownership of both issues and their solutions. This is reflected in the strong links between Landcare (other 'Care' groups) and Catchment Management. The Landcare community are the cornerstone of on-ground implementation of the catchment process. All CMCs foster landcare with most CMC members also being landcare group members (appendix 2).

As an example of the community commitment to Catchment Management, in the financial year 1998-99, over two thirds of the attendance days at all CMC meetings were by the community (appendix 3).

With the plethora of specific issue NREM committees currently in operation, the TCM model of a holistic approach allows for the efficient use of the community's limited resources.

Best practice methods of preventing, halting and reversing environmental degradation in catchments, and achieving environmental sustainability

The development of both Regional and Catchment Strategies have utilised extensive government, local government and community technical expertise. This has ensured that decisions about projects promoted, developed and supported by the respective Committees are based on current best practice methods.

The 11 CMCs through the Regional Committee over the past 3 years have assessed and recommended (and often developed) projects utilising over \$16 million of Natural Heritage Trust and NSW State funding for critical natural resource and environment repair. * It is important to note that at least the matching community 'in kind' is provided for these projects (ie in the same time over \$22.4 million has been provided by the community).

A majority of the projects are on ground works. However in order to work towards achieving environmental sustainability, some projects focus on environmental education and awareness, information collection, plans and planning, trials and demonstrations, training and skills development, monitoring, and community group coordination.

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

One of the strengths of the TCM program is that CMC's have a balance of members. Committees have a majority of community members (with broad interests), local government, state government (Department of Land and Water Conservation, State Forests, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Environment Protection Authority, NSW Agriculture), environmental interests and aboriginal representatives.

This facilitates a 'two way' communication, awareness and education of all groups involved. This means that the ensuing debate of issues from sometimes potentially disparate viewpoints is from an 'informed' position. Resolution or management of conflict is thus made easier.

Government and the private sector have the opportunity, through the TCM process, to bring to the wider community a range of their NREM issues, and in turn to have a better understanding of community views of these issues. The community has the opportunity to raise its own issues relevant to state and local government, and ultimately the combined representation of all levels of membership provides for better solutions.

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

Planning:

The North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee and the Catchment Management Committees have all prepared strategies with some having completed action plans and business plans.

The major difficulty with the current catchment planning system is the lack of formal recognition and status of the catchment based plans. There are a plethora of other plans and planning each with varying degrees of status, area covered, issue addressed and community support.

Enclosed as appendix 4 is a copy of a submission prepared in response to the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning's 'Plan Making in NSW Opportunities for the future - discussion paper.' This paper makes recommendations regarding regional structures for developing integrated regional nrem strategies and plans.

Resourcing:

The Regional Catchment Committee is supported by a full time coordinator employed by the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation. A part time clerical officer and casual funding officer assist in the administration of tasks identified in the NCCCC Business Plan. It is important to note that the Business Plan identifies the need for 2 equivalent full time staff. The difference between these resourcing needs is undertaken by voluntary community time.

CMC's are supported by a full time TCM Coordinator, who has tertiary qualifications in natural resource management. There is on average no more than 1.4 days per week of administrative support, which is inadequate for the amount of work that an effective CMC generates. Consequently Coordinators undertake much more routine secretarial duties than is warranted by their qualifications or salary, there is insufficient time spent on strategic action, and too much time spent on reaction to external demands/local issues.

Community committee members donate considerable hours to CMC business which are donated 'out of pocket' expenses.

Implementation:

Those involved in Catchment Management recognise that government departments, local government, other organisations, land managers and the community are generally best placed to implement actions identified in catchment plans.

The North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee is promoting a process to formalise the commitment of appropriate groups to implement the regional action plans. This will be through Statements of Joint Intent, Memorandums of Understanding, Performance Agreements and/or support for projects seeking funding.

Coordination:

The Catchment Management Act 1989 identifies one of the key functions of TCM as coordinating the activities of those involved in NREM.

This is an important role of CMC's, and at catchment level is successful. The creation of separate NREM committees by government (such as Regional Vegetation and Water Committees), that are not part of the CMC structure, is however contrary to achieving the most effective levels of coordination, and change in this aspect of catchment management is unwarranted.

Cooperation:

One of the major successes of Regional Catchment Management on the North Coast has been the level of cooperation amongst the community, government departments, regional local government and other regional organisations. This has resulted in many joint initiatives and projects.

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

Implementation of the North Coast Regional Strategy will be monitored against performance indicators which have been developed as part of the action plans. Links are being established with other reporting mechanisms including State of the Rivers and Estuaries, State of Catchments and State of Environment Reports. This will enable complementary reporting of nrem performance for the region.

Conclusions

Catchments are logical planning units when dealing with natural resource and environment management. Catchment Management is an established system in NSW, it is working well with exceptionally strong community support. The North Coast Catchments have in place a comprehensive community based 'framework' (strategy).

It is widely acknowledged that the Catchment Management process has played an integral part over the past decade in providing local community input into government policies and developing a broad strategic overview within catchments and regions (both of these are key performance areas and functions of catchment committees outlined in the NSW Catchment Management Act).

We have successfully facilitated regional and local delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust program and are in a sound position to extend this delivery.

The North Coast Catchment Coordinating Committee consider that the inception of regional Water and Vegetation Management Committees as well as the current restructuring proposals being considered by the NSW Government have the potential for the lowering of status or disappearance of the Catchment Management process.

In summary, the operations of TCM and their CMCs on the North Coast of NSW have added substantially to the sustainable management of the regions natural resources and environment through improved coordination and integration, better communication, effective community participation and the potential for reduced complexity and efficient processes for plan making and review, (see appendix 5 - letters of support).

Appendix 1

Population and Size Statistics for North Coast Region and Catchments

Catchment	Population	Area (Sq Km)
Tweed	75,000	1,303
Brunswick	30,000	492
Richmond	132,000	6,940
Clarence	70,000	27,200
Coffs Hbr	54,000	496
Bellinger	11,000	1,119
Nambucca	17,500	1,350
Macleay	60,000	11,450
Hastings	70,000	4,485
Manning	55,000	8,400
Karuah	70,000	4,800
North Coast	644,500	68,035

Appendix 2

Landcare Group Numbers

The regional landcare data base indicates that there are currently 365 active 'care' groups in the region with 6,372 members. There are also 13 active group networks.

Appendix 3

Current Level of Attendance in the Catchment Management Process (Financial Year 98-99)

Equivalent full day meetings	Community Attendance (Days)	Local Governm't Attendance (Days)	Environm't Attendance (Days)	Koori Attendance (Days)	Governm't Agency Attendance (Days)	Other Reps (Days)	Total Committee Days for 1998-1999
137	1134	288	216	7	363	72	2080

Appendix 4

Submission from NCCCC Regarding Proposed Structure for the Delivery of Integrated Regional Natural Resource and Environment Management

Appendix 5

Letters of Support from Community 'Care' Groups - enclosed with hard copy.