

WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY OF TROPICAL QUEENSLAND

Introduction

Across the world, nature conservation is increasingly becoming the responsibility of community-based organisations. In the UK alone, there are between 4 and 5 million members of non-government bodies that hold and manage various areas of land, primarily for the conservation of wildlife – more land than is controlled by government. This situation is mirrored in the USA and is rapidly developing in Spain, South Africa, Canada, New Zealand and many other countries.

However, here in Australia, Birds Australia, our largest membership wildlife conservation body, still has fewer than 9,000 members, compared to its UK and USA 'partner' equivalent organisations, with over a million and six million respectively. With Australia's population of 20 million, this means that if motivation and attitudes were similar here, Birds Australia should have a pro rata membership of 300,000!

Why is our approach to non-government nature conservation so different? The answer is...that, until now, the government (State and Commonwealth) has done it. However, it is a matter of fact and demography that the participation rate in the economy as reached its peak, and henceforth neither the States nor the Commonwealth can continue to meet the expanding cost of nature conservation in Australia from tax revenues alone. We therefore have no alternative but to look for alternative ways to conserve our biodiversity in the long term. So, if we are to change, which paradigm might work best?

The answer to the second question is that we should work rapidly towards the identification of a successful paradigm that is working in those nations that are already conserving significant proportions of their biodiversity through non-government efforts.

Basic models

Here in Australia, we have a plethora of effective structural blueprints at a national and regional level for environmental lobby organisations, popular conservation action groups and fundraising charities. However, amongst practical, 'on the ground' nature conservation land management organisations, the only current working blueprint we have is nationally-based

It is true that in addition to these national bodies, there are many small locally-focussed organisations looking after biodiversity, such as wildlife rescue organisations – BUT they all share a fundamental problem - they lack both the breadth and capacity to make a sustained difference at more than an ad hoc and local level.

Even particularly successful local bodies, with national and international recognition, like the Mareeba Wetland Foundation in Far North Queensland, are constantly



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shifting meagre resources around in order to meet increasingly onerous performance standards. If this sounds dysfunctional and fragmented, it is because it is.

Certain wildlife-based businesses such as zoos and tour operators also have a role to play, but their commercial imperative generally precludes them from becoming involved in extensive land management or research.

Elsewhere in the world, regional organisations are the fastest growing non-government nature conservation sector. For example, in the UK, the coalition of regional (County) Wildlife Trusts have doubled their membership to over 650,000 and vastly increased their landholdings over the past 5 years, differentially winning popular support and local involvement through their practical 'grassroots' approach.

On the one hand, there is therefore an absolute fiscal imperative to stimulate the growth of non-government nature conservation in Australia, and on the other, our only demonstrable success stories (whether national or local) are still tiny and unstable by international standards. We therefore need to bring about a massive increase in the capacity of our non-government nature conservation sector to bring them in line with the rest of the world.

Given the distribution of our population and size of our continent and the urgent need for support of local efforts, this militates strongly in favour of a regionally-based approach.

It is an undeniable axiom that to be effective biodiversity managers, nature conservation organisations must manage land. To be effective conservation land managers, they must possess high order technical, financial and managerial skills and capacity. Relatively small local nature conservation charities cannot afford these and hence tend to wear out their members, and, eventually, their support bases.

National nature conservation bodies may be able to attract and retain these capacities better but, due to the sheer 'tyranny of distance' of our continent, they are often seen as 'absentee landlords' and 'remote from the coalface' by local/regional interests. Similarly, government-generated initiatives, however well-funded and PR-ed, cannot capture local people's fundamental support.

As a consequence, the national, commercial or government stimulated paradigms we have in place in Australia at the moment are not the answer – the creation of and support for viable, community-initiated regional models is essential.

The way forward

In Tropical Queensland, the shift in thinking described above has already brought into being an unprecedented regional coalition of nature conservation expertise, based around five local conservation NGOs. This exciting new initiative – the first of its kind in regional Australia – has brought together a group of conservation



organisations in an alliance designed to change the face of nature conservation in the region forever.

This is only the beginning, as we already know other bodies see the benefit of joining a regional nature conservation alliance, further adding to its capacity to manage the incredible biodiversity of the region. An example of this is local government, which has already opened a dialogue on the future management of certain reserves and other land parcels of existing or significant potential biodiversity value.

The new regional organisation has been called the Wildlife Conservancy of Tropical Queensland (WCTQ) to reflect its focus. Its main areas of operation are set out below:

- Conservation land management
- Rescue and rehabilitation of native wildlife
- Conservation advice, education and training
- Research and surveillance of wildlife health in relation to the better management of native and exotic species.

The WCTQ has in the region of \$3 million of net assets, a combined membership of over 1,000 and a strong voluntary management team. However, it urgently requires operational capital to leverage its asset, membership and skills base and allow it to realise its massive potential to the full.

WCTA income streams

Once established, the WCTQ anticipates generating capital and operational revenues from the following sources:

- Conservation management and advice
- Education and research programs
- Visitors to WCTQ reserves
- Memberships and trading
- Donations and bequests
- Government grants and in kind support
- Commercial sponsorship programs

All of these require a critical mass to be viable that is unachievable by local organisations; a regional operational focus is therefore essential. To help this model to overcome the inertia of the current government-oriented climate in nature conservation and take its place at the table requires at least some initial operational funding by Government – after which time it will become self-supporting.