

**Submission to the Senate Committee on Rural and
Regional Affairs and Transport**
Inquiry into Natural Resource Management and Conservation
Challenges
by the South West Catchments Council Inc.
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Authorised by the Chairman of the South West Catchments Council Inc.

The South West Catchments Council wishes to make a submission on the Inquiry into Natural Resource Management. Over time there has been developed an institutional response in natural resource management to the challenges of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) which while far from perfect, has gradually improved and become more strategic and inclusive. Variation between states probably blurs the picture but it is to be hoped that there will be further development of an institutional framework. Obviously we rely mainly on WA experience for our comment.

The lessons learned:

Capacity building is crucial to working with the community. The network of NRM officers now established is proving invaluable in being part of, and helping to build that capacity among land managers. One lesson learnt.

The Regional Delivery Model (RDM) has started to deliver on its theoretical (adaptive management) promises based on of a strategic approach with better integration and community involvement. It has combined the expertise of state agencies and science institutions with the practical knowledge of landowners and environmental groups in a systematic way which enables subsidiarity within a framework which prioritises assets and sets targets. The application of adaptive management to the pursuit of ESD is thus well placed within regions in accord with its theory even though there is room for improvement in that application.

Both national and WA inquiries have basically supported the RDM. Another lesson learnt.

Within the SW the regional delivery model has been successful and beneficial, often uniquely, in the following ways:

- The amount of in kind investment contributed by landowners and other recipients; for SWCC in kind contributions average about 50% of the total funding for 'on ground' works, other contributions take this figure much higher.
- Effecting regional prioritisation, NRM strategies and investment plans using logic based RCTs and MATs.
- Improvements in governance by regions and sub-regional partners.
- Provision of community leadership by NRM groups through identifying priorities, coordinating projects, and engaging with landowners, local government, agencies, community groups and other participants.
- The ability to incorporate local concerns into strategies and to be adaptive.
- The ability to integrate across thematic areas and focus on specific priority Natural Assets – often there maybe multiple threats, across multiple tenures, impacting on one priority asset which cross the multiple boundaries (“silos”) of state and federal agencies. Often, no one agent has a single clear lines of responsibility – NRM Regional groups have the ability to span these array of factors and keep focused on delivering the outcome for the natural asset. This ability to integrate and stay focused is an important institutional function of regional groups, that some may argue is unique.
- Implementing the actions of regional and sub-regional strategies and investment plans; the model has not only allowed communities to become the stewards of their environment but has released a flood of interest and activity frustrated by inaction over previous decades.

The RDM has also revealed big gaps in data on the state of resources. One of the criticisms of the Auditor-General was the weakness of the program logic. The whole field of monitoring and evaluation is therefore one area which is coming from a low base, and on which much attention needs to focus. Lesson learnt of a weakness.

The stop/start nature of funding programs besides the personal cost of uncertainty of tenure and continuation of contracts (or lack of them) has had significant effect on the implementation of strategies and on NRM professionals. As the program gets more developed it should to be funded from consolidated revenue rather than grants. Another lesson learnt of a weakness.

While the various programs of NLP,NAP,NHT, Envirofund etc. may have ensured some gaps in need were filled there is considerable room for improvement to achieve better outcomes. As the knowledge base improves it is desirable to move towards a more integrated funding model based on National, Regional and local level funds.

Related to this is the slow involvement of various sectors, probably for different reasons. Local government's involvement had a big hurdle in WA in that the regions formed were so big, and many of the local governments so small so regions had 30-40 local governments to include. In the SW they engaged better at a sub-regional level, unless there were formal programs such as ICLEI's Water Campaign, and the Perth/SW Biodiversity Program. Indigenous engagement was even slower but this is expected. Where face to face contact and only one local group it was a rewarding collaboration. In SW the capacity of the SWCC did enable high level protocols to be developed. This was followed by similar arrangements by at least one agency, but this was probably more a *zeitgeist* effect than any leadership shown. With NGO's it did take a while for them to devolve their national or state-wide programs down to a regional, or in the SW, sub-regional level. Such collaboration though is a desirable outcome of the RDM and probably just needs time.

Another lesson learnt is that involving community in a strategic way has enabled important issues that were just too difficult for agencies to tackle to be addressed. Examples in the SW would be the vexed question of coastal drainage (and probably some impetus given to the urban drainage program of the State), and the development of management plans for Ramsar wetlands (WA Auditor-General was very critical of lead agency for lack of these plans) – because of multiple ownership problems it did require an external body that could help integrate across State agencies, local government, private owners and involved community. Another example in WA was the need for regional groups (sub-regions) to help implement the Coastal Catchments Initiative, without them it floundered – until they took leadership.

Building on knowledge and experience:

To maintain commitment and momentum there needs to be a funding model that is part of government function and with the fundamentals independent of electoral cycles. It would of course be subject to Budget decisions and periodic reviews but there needs to be a period of stability and growth – and some level of certainty.

Previous section answers this question. Knowledge brokering and communication is fundamental to maintenance of commitment, this was not covered above.

The overall costs and benefits of a regional approach:

This is beyond the capacity of the groups themselves to undertake. Observation from our experience would point to a much more focussed and integrated approach than existed beforehand. It would be interesting to assess if had that amount of money been delivered through State agencies would it would have achieved the same quality or quantity of outcomes? It certainly would not have been transparently spent, nor reported on, so would be much more difficult to assess.

The regional development approach has seen the increased growth of an involved community which is questioning traditional approaches and demanding greater or faster action. There also seems to have been more and easier collaboration between agencies that just wasn't there beforehand.

One unexpected result has been the revelation of a problem of working with a land-use planning system that is not adaptive in that it has very little, if any, monitoring of the consequences of its decisions on natural resources. This is particularly significant in that it has a large effect on biodiversity conservation, water quality, sustainable agriculture, coastal landscapes, groundwater systems, and air quality. It is also very important in light of predicted effects of climate change.

The need for a long term strategic approach:

The concept of Regional Strategies and Investment Plans seems sound, and in WA the achievements of the regional groups without the support of a relevant State Strategy was commendable. The improvement of the Strategies should be straightforward as knowledge increases, targets are SMARTened and monitoring, evaluation and reporting becomes more relevant, functional, accessible and properly provides direction. The role and functioning of Investment Plans is more difficult to systematically improve so objectives are met and activities are cost effective. Improvement in this area is likely to be more gradual, so groups and agencies in the meantime will continue the adaptive management process on available data research findings and expert advice.

Note: The problem can be summarised as follows. The lack of baseline information and insufficient resources to collate and interpret data are detrimental to target setting and MER. Regional groups do not have the capacity to conduct impact and cost effectiveness analysis to guide investment decisions. Therefore there is a need for government to resource the evaluation of key State and regional NRM programs and projects to assess their likely impact and cost effectiveness.

As knowledge on ecosystems themselves and the services they provide increases there should be a quantum change in Investment Plans as a really active adaptive management paradigm becomes possible. This is starting to happen in discreet areas but is dependent on stability of monitoring and of key personnel.

The capacity of regional NRM groups,...and other national conservation networks to engage:

The regional groups and/or catchment management organisations, building on the Landcare initiative, have a good network of people on the ground and a growing battery of tools, enabling them to engage landholders and resource managers. Because of this, the issue of behaviour change is now on the agenda in many areas.

The national conservation networks/NGOs do not have this network but are able through partnerships to engage in delivering shared outcomes if they wish. Without these partnerships they have to develop a strong local or regional capacity and presence which would seem to be an unnecessary duplication. Their more effective contribution is their ability to bring corporate money into the partnership as well as extra expertise and different perspectives.

In the SW sub-regions there are excellent examples of strong regional partnerships developing, involving multiple agencies, NRM catchment group, NGOs, Aboriginals and Universities working within the framework of the Regional Strategy. While it is too early to say that the RDM delivers the required outcomes it has certainly stirred up a lot more focussed action than was there beforehand so the indications are positive.

The extent to which CfoC represents a comprehensive approach..:

While still in its infancy, the new Caring for our Country presents both some positive aspects and challenges for the future of NRM in Australia.

Of most concern however is that SWCC felt that a much more comprehensive review was required by the new government regarding the existing NRM program and its institutional arrangements before embarking on such radical changes in this sector. The speed and radicalism of the change does not seem to be congruent with other change programs across the Australian Government, such as Defence, Climate Change, Health and other sectors which, while recognising the need for change in these areas, seem to have taken a more cautious approach. For example the policy responding to climate change seems to be a 3 step process involving an independent review, green paper, then a white paper. The review of defence strategic policy and expenditure seems to be taken a similar cautious path – which should be commended. On the other hand there seemed to be no similarly staged and transparent review process for the NRM strategic policy and expenditure. At the very least it would seem appropriate for the new government to spend time analysing the independent Commonwealth Auditor General's report and responding to each element or recommendation accordingly, all be it within the context of the new Government's policy platform (as is the case with the approach being undertaken within climate change policy areas). After saying this, the Caring for Country Program has implemented transition arrangements for the 2008/09 recognising the need for time to establish the new program.

Some of the positives of the new program include:

- Its aim to set clear concise investment priorities from the Australian Government. Lack of clarity (or more particularly a somewhat moving target) in this area has been an issue for regions such as SWCC for some time. It is a positive step forward for one of the major investors in NRM to invest the required effort in offering clarity around its priorities. Although, in any partnership approach the next step is to

then negotiate joint, mutually agreed outcomes with other partners (we hope this is the next phase of Caring for our Country – a negotiated approach, rather than simply a top down approach).

- It has put in place transition arrangements within a rapid time frame that should give regional groups time to make the required adjustments to meet the new Program's direction and delivery mechanisms.

Some of the issues of concern that SWCC still has about the new program in regards to future NRM needs include:

- A lack of a comprehensive and transparent review of the institutional and delivery mechanism arrangements (see above).
- It does not seem to be vertically integrated. While greater clarity about the Australian Government's priorities are welcomed, the new Program seems to have take a step back from a National approach (in so much that National includes all relevant jurisdictions – including local and regional, but most importantly State and Australian Government). It would seem that it may have been more advantageous for the Australian Government to take time to take stock of its own priorities and needs, but then enter back into a negotiated framework such as was offered through the Ministerial Council framework and the joint investment via negotiated regional investment plans.
- There is concern that the almost titanic effort (and investment) in the development of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART) targets and the more recent increasing emphasis on Program Logic no longer plays a central role in the investment framework of Caring for our Country. This was a fundamental leap forward in transparent, accountable and focused investment in NRM in Australia (and something that major leading scientists, e.g. the Wentworth Group, CSIRO were calling for as far back as the 1990's). There now only seems to be passing reference to these fundamental elements in the documentation surrounding the new Program.
- There are concerns that Australian Government targets will be too broad and lack the specificity to give strong guidance to proponents through open call bidding processes. This may result in major wasted

effort of government, educational, non-government organisations, but most worryingly volunteer community groups. SWCC understands that the first Caring for our Country open call may have been over-subscribed by one or two orders of magnitude. This has serious implications as each application consist of more than just completing and submitting templates. A good project proposal should be scoped, costed, and have consultation with relevant stakeholders before submission – which may take days of time for each application. This may acceptable for the private industry (who recover their tendering costs through their on-cost structures), but is much more of a burden on community groups (particularly if the large majority of them are unsuccessful). The regional delivery model, including the indicative allocation approach, was not only efficient but also allowed regions to work with the partners to manage expectations within the context of regional, state and national priorities.

- Local Governments have a very and increasingly important role to play in NRM, and significant inroads have been made by regions such as SWCC to build productive partnerships. There is a sense that practical recognition of their active role in NRM seems to have been diminished within the new Program

Overall the Australian local NRM/Environmental/Landcare community is very robust and will work within any given institutional framework to still achieve amazing results. The in-kind matching contributions from local community volunteers are still the envy of much of the Western World. SWCC is confident that it can operate in the new Program environment and deliver tangible benefits for government investors and its regional community. However, significant institutional, governance and policy gains have been made through the formative years of the former programs (NAP, NHT2). While significant recognition of this has been made by the Australian Governments via its commitment to direct regional funding, there are other concerns relating to elements such as the focus of investment by robust SMART targets, program logic and community consultation in regional scale decision making that seem to require significantly more attention.

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