

Letting the locals lead

An innovative framework of regional responsibility for the management of our natural resources is emerging. Brian Head presents an overview.

Over the last twenty years, governments in Australia have been urgently developing new approaches to sustainable natural resource management (NRM). Building on some successful independent examples, cooperative regional scale governance has emerged as the preferred approach in Australia for addressing broad sustainability challenges. However, with deep complexity, both in current governance structures and the nature of our resource management issues, successful long-term regional management will require enduring and coordinated leadership. So far, a great start has been made.

The decentralised and participatory aspects of this new regional approach originated in the Landcare movement and 'integrated catchment' strategies developed in the late 1980s to tackle water and land degradation. Battles over logging in old-growth native forests led to an agreement in the mid-1990s to resolve these land-use disputes through a 'regional' assessment process for forestry. From this, federal programs for environmental and NRM issues became increasingly focused on regional planning and delivery.

General support has now emerged for four fundamental priorities:

- finding integrated solutions to address complex long-term issues;
- seeking collaboration and sharing responsibility with industry partners and non-government organisations (NGOs);
- improving the information bases for decisions and monitoring; and
- focusing on the catchment or regional scale for planning and priority-setting.

Collaborative and evidence-based processes are intended to reduce adversarial behaviour and allow constructive focus on long-term strategies. However, building long-term partnerships is not easy. It requires trust and confidence, which can



A regional framework will encourage divestment of NRM responsibility to local landholders. Here a farmer shows visitors spotted gums planted in his part of the recharge area of a catchment. CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products

only emerge over an extended period – well beyond the usual electoral cycle of governments. Sustainability must therefore be bipartisan, and draw on the goodwill of industry and NGOs.

Major strategic shifts also need new institutional arrangements and incentives. This clearly requires cooperation between three levels of government, together with adequate funding to ensure sufficient cooperation of all stakeholders. The national Salinity and Water Quality program from 2000–01 is a good example where these issues were addressed. It involved:

- federal/state shared funding, totalling \$1.4 billion over seven years;
- targeting of 21 priority catchments with salinity and/or water quality problems; and
- regional plans to be developed by regional communities within a framework of standards, targets and outcomes agreed by governments.

Similarly, the federal government reconfigured the Natural Heritage Trust program along 'regional' planning lines in 2001–02. The revised program (NHT2) is a five-year national program with \$1 billion of federal funds, with the states obliged to 'match' certain components of the program. NHT2 has established four focus themes – Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare and Coastcare – and covers the whole nation (currently 57 regions).

The federal government's new NRM framework represents an internationally

significant commitment to a regional sustainability focus. Key innovations are:

- systematic regional focus with designated 'regional bodies';
- consultative partnership models; and
- commitment to investing in the knowledge base.

The new programs required rapid resolution of difficult issues, such as how many regions, the functions and composition of regional bodies, the priorities for regional NRM investment, consultation requirements, approval mechanisms, and accountability and reporting rules.

Experience around Australia in 'regional' forms of planning and governance has been variable, ranging from states with little experience to those with previous institutional commitments to 'regional' NRM governance. Now, though, the regional bodies have been assigned major responsibilities, including:

- to develop a single NRM Plan and investment proposals for the region;
- to ensure the Plan takes account of all federal and state strategic frameworks and legal requirements; and
- to ensure the Plan is subjected to wide consultation and makes best use of available information.

The technical quality of these plans and the extent of their community-based legitimacy have yet to be tested, but we already know that uncertainties and challenges are being recognised by participants in these processes. Some of these uncertainties,

which arise from our traditional political institutions, are:

- will governments devolve real power to the community-based regional bodies or simply delegate key tasks to them?
- can the strategic directions of three levels of government be sufficiently aligned?
- does the accountability process for regional bodies have to be so complex?
- will long-term funding be guaranteed?
- can governments hold a steady course for another five years until positive on-ground outcomes begin to emerge?

A reasonable timeframe for testing the new arrangements might be five to seven years, but governmental reporting and political impatience could require much shorter timeframes for demonstrating results.

But there are also new issues, including:

- the capabilities and leadership skills available in 57 regions of the nation;
- the large demands for information to support the planning;
- appropriate respect for Indigenous

knowledge and cultural interests; and

- recognising the diversity of stakeholders whose commitment is essential.

Change generally involves winners and losers, so there are important processes needed to mitigate the adjustment costs in a fair manner over time. But what proportion of program and adjustment costs should be borne by industries, the federal government and the States?

In summary, as Australia's approach to sustainability evolves, many of these new challenges are essentially about clear leadership and governance. They will be met through building commitment among diverse regional stakeholders, and developing a genuine partnership framework for priority setting and accountability.

More information:

The National Heritage Trust: www.nht.gov.au
National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality: www.napswq.gov.au

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Better understanding of area-specific processes means regional decision-making is more appropriate for many management issues, such as fire regime. CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems

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