

Community engagement for the reef's sake

The community of the Tully region in far north Queensland has teamed up with scientists from CSIRO's Water for a Healthy Country Flagship to create a leading example of participatory research in action.

The Flagship's Great Barrier Reef Floodplain Renewal Project is focussing on the Tully/Murray catchment as an initial case study for improving water quality flowing out onto the reef.

By working in partnership with the local council, industry and community groups and the regional NRM board (Far North Queensland NRM Ltd), the researchers are identifying the most efficient and practical ways to adapt land-use and farming practices to reduce sediment, nutrient and pesticide loads in the catchment, which have been identified as a threat to near-shore reef ecosystems and seagrass beds.

The Tully is a lush, green high-rainfall region situated 140 km south of Cairns. It includes the Tully and Murray rivers, which flow from the rainforest-clad mountains of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area through farmland and out to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) lagoon.

In 2003 the State-Federal 'Reef Water Quality Protection Plan' identified the Tully as one of the top 10 high-risk catchments potentially contributing to water quality problems on the Great Barrier Reef. This made the catchment a high priority for research and action by a whole range of government and non-government bodies. To better coordinate all this activity, CSIRO, local industry and community leaders and the Cardwell Shire Council initiated the Cardwell Shire Floodplain Program (CSFP).

The CSFP operates on the principle that local betterment



The Tully River from a roadside lookout, near the township in Qld.

Willem van Aken/CSIRO Land and Water

This partnership in the Tully is building cooperation and understanding between scientists and the local community.

programs are more likely to be embraced and implemented in the community concerned if the community has a sense of ownership. It is made up of representatives from, primary industry groups, the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, conservation groups, the shire council, Far North Queensland NRM Ltd, State and Federal Government agencies, and research organisations.

This broad cross-section of people has the challenging task

of developing a Water Quality Improvement Plan (WQIP) for the catchment. The WQIP is currently in the research and planning phase and is due to be completed by June 2007. It will set out a series of actions to meet defined targets for reducing pollutant levels over a time frame of up to 25 years.

The CSFP has a Steering Committee and three 'action teams' working on biodiversity, production and socio-cultural issues in the catchment. The

action teams operate as reference panels for scientists undertaking research in the catchment. Initially, the teams provide input on the shape and methodology of the research project; research results are then presented back to the group for consideration and inclusion in the WQIP planning process.

This close collaboration at every stage of the research process has clear benefits, as well as challenges. CSIRO Senior Research Scientist and CSFP Program Manager, Dr Frederieke Kroon, says, 'We know we're working on real-life problems, issues that the community sees as important.'

She says the local people involved in the process are providing unique and valuable input while learning much about the economy, ecology and culture of their area. However, she recognises that researchers are asking a lot from the community.

'The debates are sometimes vigorous, but the professionalism of the individuals and the recognised need to improve sustainable production, biodiversity outcomes and community capacity has always prevailed.'

This partnership in the Tully is building cooperation and understanding between scientists and the local community. With commitment from all, it will continue to be a groundbreaking and productive initiative for many years to come, and could lead the way in solving some of the most pressing water quality issues on the Great Barrier Reef.

● Louise Matthieson and Frederieke Kroon

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