

10 YEARS and 800 000 volunteers down the track ...

As the Natural Heritage Trust celebrates its 10th birthday and moves to its third phase, **Sophie Clayton** examines its evolution, achievements and lessons learned along the way – including the important legacy of community capacity building.

It's been credited with improving more than 2 million hectares of native bushland, mobilising 800 000 volunteers, and directing government funds into more than 27 000 regional and local natural resource management projects around the country. In fact, it has been described as 'the largest environmental program ever'.

Ten years after the first Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) projects commenced, the Ministers for Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, Peter McGauran, and Environment and Water Resources, Malcolm Turnbull, announced earlier this year that \$2 billion would be spent on the third phase of the NHT, known as NHT3.

So what's the verdict on NHT 10 years on? Has it delivered on its early objectives? What lessons have been learned? And is there evidence that the community spirit engendered by the local and regional focus has translated into measurable environmental improvements on the ground?

Stage 1: the seed is planted

In 1997, under the first stage of the NHT, the Australian Government began funding projects from the part-sale of Telstra, which netted the environment the considerable sum of \$1.25 billion.

The government labelled it a 'trust fund for the protection and rehabilitation of Australia's natural environment'. Its three broad objectives, still in place, were biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of natural resources, and community capacity building and institutional change.

While hailed as a breakthrough, in its early years, the NHT was also regarded as a vision in search of a strategic plan. NHT1 funded thousands of projects, valued at anything from a thousand dollars to well over \$4 million. They ranged from small-



One of the positive legacies of the Natural Heritage Trust has been the opportunity for hundreds of thousands of Australians to become directly involved in natural resource management activities. Conservation Volunteers Australia

scale revegetation activities to stormwater treatment, fauna monitoring programs, Landcare coordinator positions, salinity mapping and bush-track upgrades. Anyone and everyone applied – community groups, schools, non-profit organisations, research institutions, regional bodies, and state and local government.

It was the mid-term review of NHT1 in 2000 that formally identified the need for change – a regional approach; better partnering arrangements between the Australian Government and local government, community groups and industry; and a long-term, strategic commitment to natural resource management.

On the positive side, NHT1 began engaging the community in managing the

nation's natural assets on a larger scale than ever before.

'NHT1 changed the way the Australian Government supported natural resource management across the country,' says Tom Aldred, Executive Manager of the Natural Resource Management (NRM) division of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF).

But, he adds, while NHT1 succeeded in engaging communities at the local level, the 2000 mid-term review indicated that major landscape changes were not taking place.

Indeed, the findings of that review shaped the development of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) as well as the final years of NHT1, and also informed the revision of planning for NHT2.



A 2002 bird survey within the NHT project area at Anderson's Lake, WA, showed that birds such as the striated pardalote were returning to revegetated areas. *Dick Walker*

Stage 2: more regional, strategic focus

In announcing NHT2 in 2001, then-Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Warren Truss, said that the government would be taking a long-term approach with the next phase of the Trust and focus on investing in large, strategic projects at the regional level.

This was a turning point for NHT, according to Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) spokesperson, Alison Cleary.

'Since 2000, it is clear that important progress has been made in NRM,' she says. 'The design and delivery of NAP and NHT2 show real improvements over the original NHT, indicating a willingness on the part of governments to explore ideas for securing better environmental returns on investment.'

For NHT2, the government identified 56 NRM regions across Australia, most defined by catchment or bioregion boundaries.

Each region is serviced by a different type of regional NRM body to accommodate existing local and state government administrative infrastructure. In some states, statutory arrangements exist for the regional bodies and in others the arrangements are voluntary. Each regional body, however, has the same task: to develop a regional NRM plan.

The plans – involving community consultation and accreditation by the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments – identified catchment-wide

activities targeting a range of resource management issues, including land and water management, biodiversity and agricultural practices.

The plans are the strategic element of NHT2 and help regions access federal government funding without the need for individual groups to submit project plans or applications.

National Farmers Federation (NFF) spokesperson, Gerald Leach, says regional plans also provide a strategic framework against which outcomes can be mapped.

Leach also believes regional plans result in more money getting on the ground, and are more likely to be effective because they are formulated by members of regional bodies, who are close to the coal-face and understand their region.

Delivery of NHT funding now occurs at three levels – national, regional and local. Most of the funding is funnelled through regional bodies. Envirofund, the local action component of the NHT, provides alternative funding to community groups and individuals of up to \$50 000 to carry out local projects.

'Local funding is still critical as it gets groups to start up. These projects may be important locally but may not be highest priority at regional level. Funding them allows [local groups] to be engaged,' says DAFF's Aldred.

'In the next phase of the trust, we want to put a lot of emphasis on improving collaboration, aligning objectives and improving engagement with local groups.'

Mixed success with NHT1 project



Landholders planting seedlings in 1997 within the Anderson's Lake catchment, now 'functioning habitat'. *Jack Mercer*

In 1997, landholder Ray Squibb was involved in a project to revegetate creek lines, hillside seeps and ridges in the Anderson's Lake catchment, north of the Stirling Ranges in the South Coast NRM region of Western Australia.

Afflicted with salinity and stripped of much of its original vegetation, the catchment was considered a prime target for rehabilitation.

Squibb recalls the project as being very successful and a catalyst for community activity. Over 150 hectares on at least eight different properties were planted or direct seeded with suitable local plant species. According to Jack Mercer, who helped manage the project, 'The transition from salinised, waterlogged land to a functioning plant community, and an apparently functioning habitat with available food sources, was achieved in monitored areas.'

Mercer also says a 2002 bird survey shows the revegetated areas were used by 22 bird species, including four that were dependent on the revegetation for food and habitat.

Squibb says the region was a priority during the first round of NHT funding, and a revegetation project seemed like an effective way to bring people together. 'We were very fortunate to have a group of cooperative farmers,' he adds. However, he also feels that while the project was successful, the scale of the work burned out local volunteers who, he thinks, would not be involved in such a big project again.

The circumstances have also changed. Squibb says that drainage – which is more divisive than tree planting – is now the biggest issue in the area, and that because the region is no longer a regional priority, getting expert help with community projects is harder.

Progress

Now that the investment in developing NRM plans has been made through NHT2, it is anticipated that more funding will be directed to on-ground works again when NHT3 opens its doors to submissions in July 2008. A summary of NHT2 reviews states that: 'The strong message was that the regional model is working and the community does not want a major change. The third phase of the Natural Heritage Trust will build on the current strengths and refine delivery including streamlining the NAP with NHT.'

The future: monitoring progress

While NFF's Leach believes NHT has succeeded in delivering 'long-term sustainable changes in natural resource management', the ACF's view is that the Australian Government still lacks a strong and sustained commitment to conservation.

Although biodiversity conservation is one of the NHT's objectives, Alison Cleary says it is 'too often poorly integrated into natural resource management planning and regional delivery.'

'Reliable, up-to-date information on the condition of many species and ecological communities is lacking and long-term research and monitoring is limited,' she adds.

This view is supported by the State of the Environment Report 2006, which states: 'It is still not possible to give a comprehensive national picture of the



In a successful NHT2 project in north Queensland, a solution was found to the problem of nitro-fertiliser being washed off canefields into waterways causing algal blooms. CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems

state of Australia's environment because of the lack of accurate, nationally consistent environmental data.'

Nevertheless, the 2006 report does say that efforts to protect biodiversity via the NHT reflect a change in attitude, with more people valuing 'biodiversity for its own sake.'

In fact, one of the NHT's greatest successes may be in the area of community capacity building – providing the resources, awareness and framework for integrated grassroots action.

Dr Daniel Walker, who works in CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, the division of

CSIRO that helped Queensland's Wet Tropics region compile its NRM plan, certainly thinks so. 'In some places NHT is achieving outcomes on the ground,' he says, 'but a bigger and more important role is in getting people engaged with issues and building capacity – an important part of gearing up to tackle issues.'

More information:

Natural Heritage Trust, www.nht.gov.au

Australian Government Natural Resource Management, www.nrm.gov.au

State of the Environment Report 2006, www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006

Bringing it all together: an NHT2 case study

In the Wet Tropics NRM region of Queensland – running from north of Mossman to south of Innisfail – a regional management plan was compiled in 2004 with the help of CSIRO and the Rainforest Cooperative Research Centre with input from the local community, including traditional owners.

Dr Allan Dale, CEO of the regional body Terrain Natural Resource Management (Terrain), says that prior to the plan, there were 'many small disconnected projects and not always a lot of strategic action.'

'Longer term programs are now in place thanks to NHT. There is a stronger ability to lever more money and there is a higher level of community awareness.'

One such strategic project, partly funded by the NHT, is investigating nitrogen-fixing bacteria in sugar cane.

Nitrogen fertiliser applied to sugar cane is highly soluble and with the Wet Tropics' high



John Reghenzani sampling soil for nitrogen-fixing bacteria on a cane farm near Ingham, north Queensland. John Reghenzani

rainfall is easily washed off into waterways where it promotes algal growth.

According to NRM Sustainable Agriculture Program Leader, John Reghenzani, sugar cane varieties that contain the bacteria can

take nitrogen from the air, so potentially require less nitrogen fertiliser, reducing water pollution and saving farmers money.

The project fulfills two priorities of Terrain's NRM plan: maintaining healthy waterways and wetlands and using soils and water sustainably and productively.

Reghenzani says the work is a 'quantum leap in terms of technology' ahead of conventional methods of reducing fertiliser that include matching fertiliser application to crop needs and avoiding fertiliser application before rain. Farmers are now involved in testing promising varieties, and useful results could be applied not only across the Wet Tropics region, but in other cane-growing regions too.

Terrain is about to review its progress towards the NRM plan. Dale says he believes the program is heading in the right direction and will 'just get stronger'.