

The Burnett Mary - planning Coastal & Marine Management from the ground up

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Background

In 1996, the sale of 49% of the Australian government-owned company Telstra led to a decision that would change the face of natural resource management (NRM) in Australia forever. The formation of a \$51 billion National Heritage Trust (NHT or 'the Trust') fund ensured an on-going budget of around \$250M + per annum that by far exceeded any previously dedicated funding for NRM in our country.

How to spend it however, was a challenge. Under NHT1 (1996-2001), trust funds were devolved via Federal Government programs such as Landcare, Coastcare, Bushcare and Rivercare. The Federal Government entered jointly into arrangements with State Governments on a 50:50 basis (under the Bilateral Agreement) with programs managed in Queensland by State Government agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources and the Environmental Protection Agency (now the Department of Environment and Natural Resources or DERM).

Nationally, volunteers took up the call to show they "cared" by planting thousands of trees, rehabilitating kilometres of coastline and fencing off rivers and waterways to protect riparian areas.

But in 2001, the Australian Government made the decision to close-out NHT1. Aside from empowering an NRM community, there were some questions that needed to be addressed such as:

- Was work completed under NHT1 the most strategic?
- Did it address the most urgent threats facing our nation's natural resources?
- Did completed projects work and was there on-going management to prevent the issues recurring?

Sadly, despite the many, many success stories, there were some problems. So where was the Australian Government to go from here?

Recognising the need for action to tackle salinity and water quality problems the Australian, state and territory governments adopted the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) in 2000. Looking at geographical regions of greatest salinity threat. Here was a plan that aimed to address a 'single,' albeit complex, threat to our nation's natural resources

But the NAP wasn't enough – with so many more issues, the decision was reached to go to full regional arrangements. Originally, these regions were formed around the NAP boundaries; but with so many areas outside the NAP plan, the NHT regionalisation model was formed with over 50 regions throughout Australia and ~14 of these in Queensland alone. To bid for the new Trust funds (now called NHT2), each region would need to produce a regional NRM Plan that had to be accredited by both the State and Federal Governments.

All around the country, different regional models were enacted. In some states these were statutory authorities called catchment management authorities (CMAs) with the full support of State Government agencies. In Queensland, we took what was generally considered the

hardest path – non-government, not-for-profit organisations or regional bodies. It was not going to be easy!

So how do you write a plan from the ground up?

In a perfect world, the *plan, do, review* methodology looks a little like this:

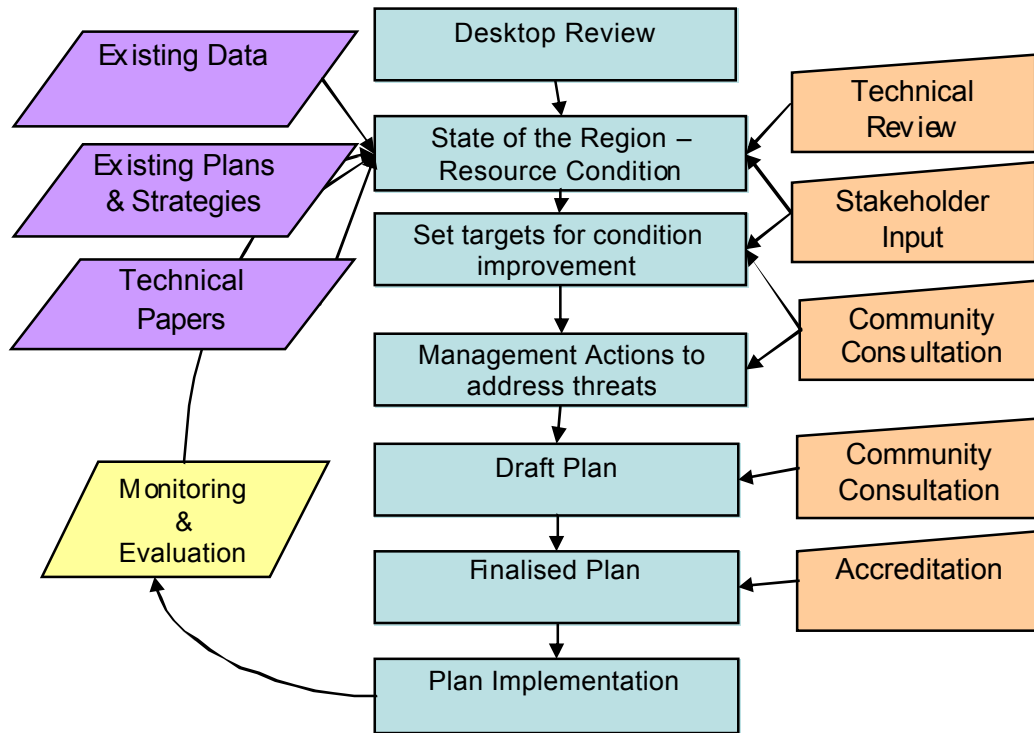


Fig 1: Regional NRM Planning Process 2003-5

More recently this process has been adapted to recognise the importance of using a MERI (Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement) process by recognising different types of management actions and foundational activities to ensure a ‘joined up planning’ approach and feedback mechanism to inform plan reviews in the future. In other words, making sure that the end (outcomes for resource condition improvement) is indeed justified by the means (management actions and foundational activities).

Getting Started

The Burnett Mary Regional Group for NRM (BMRG) commissioned a consultant to develop the first Burnett Mary State of the Region Report in 2003. In the first draft – Coastal & Marine Resources received one paragraph in the document which stated (in summary) that there was adequate available information on the region’s coastal and marine resources to set targets. When asked what this information comprised of, it became very obvious that terrestrial people, however skilled, (and in this instance soil scientists) shouldn’t be asked to assess coastal and marine systems.

What they were referring to was the zoning plan for the Great Barrier Reef and what was then the Woongarra and Hervey Bay Marine Parks (now the Great Sandy Marine Park, 2006), the presence of a Ram sar wetland (Great Sandy Strait) and some seagrass mapping

undertaken over a decade earlier. When asked to expand on this for their final version of the State of the Region report the consultants took this approach:

Asset themes within the region include Terrestrial Biodiversity, Freshwater Biodiversity (also referred to as inland aquatic ecosystems), Land Resources, Water Resources, Marine Biodiversity, Coastal and Marine Development and Social Capital and Capacity. The State of the Region study has focussed on the first four of these asset themes. (LRAM, 2004)

Following an extensive internal desktop review, the BMRG commissioned a series of Technical Papers to complement the State of the Region Report. These included two papers (Kirkwood and Hooper, 2004 and Pitts, 2004) specifically focused around the Coastal & Marine Management Action Program's themes:

- Marine Biodiversity (to protect, conserve and restore the region's coastal, estuarine and marine biodiversity resources) and
- Coastal and Marine Development (to address the threats to coastal and marine biodiversity).

The objective of these papers was to do a complete data trawl of available biodiversity information and to identify innovative ways to address current threats, which despite the funding and time constraints placed upon our authors, was achieved.

The next steps . . . consult, consult and consult!

True consultation not only engages your stakeholders, but by recognising their needs, wants and issues, gives them a sense of ownership of the plan and the need to act.

Consultation started in December 2003 with a series of community Round Tables. These sessions allowed community members and other stakeholders to have their say about issues in their geographical area.

The eight sessions around our community resulted in literally thousands of pieces of information and feedback, which then had to be verified and incorporated (where possible) into the planning process. Again this process demonstrated the absence of data, information and understanding of the Coastal and Marine Resources in the Burnett Mary region.

That said, people did have an opinion, and they weren't afraid to give it. Our non-statutory not-for-profit status (despite the fact that our funding was provided jointly by the Federal and State Governments) gave us access to information sources that would probably not have been quite so readily accessible or forthcoming to government departments.

Conversely, some of the information held by the State Government proved extremely difficult to extricate – one of the disadvantages of being a non-statutory, government or even quasi-government organisation. The process did however highlight data management deficiencies in several government areas and a keenness to partner in others.

Drafting a Plan

Once the technical papers were available and the first round of consultation was over, we drafted the plan. Sounds simple, but it isn't. Writing a document that represents the needs, wants and aspirations of a whole regional community is a challenge. Writing it to recognise the complex arena of Federal and Queensland policy and planning as well – a trial.

Significant feedback was also provided to the BMRG by the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) who reviewed and coordinated input from the State Agencies (through the Regional Coordination Group) and partners such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

Once the plan was drafted, it again went out to community and wider consultation for feedback before *Country to Coast – a healthy, sustainable future* was finalised in December 2004 and accredited by the Federal and State Governments in April 2005.

The next challenge - implementation

Given the international significance of the region's coastal and marine resources which include two World Heritage Areas (the southern section of the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island) and the Great Sandy Ramsar Wetland, the Burnett Mary's Coastal & Marine Management Action Program attracted over 15% of the overall budget and resulted in over \$2.5M invested in our coastal and marine resources between 2005 and 2008.

The Coastal and Marine Management Action Program had activities under all four delivery areas – resource assessment (or foundational style activities), planning initiatives, on-ground works – principally on foreshores or tidal wetland rehabilitation and capacity building.

But implementing regional arrangements under NHT2 was an uphill challenge for the 'new kids on the block'. For coastal and marine resources in particular, there had been a loss of program funding previously provided under the Coastcare and Coast and Clean Seas programs between 2002 and 2005, with no transitional funding provided to coastal projects. This loss of momentum and funding had resulted in the loss of several smaller community groups (and the interest of key individuals within these organisations) leaving a severely diminished network.

Added to this the Burnett Mary is geographically located between major centres for coastal and marine research which have traditionally have been centred around Townsville (Australian Institute of Marine Science, James Cook University and the Reef CRC) and Brisbane / Moreton Bay (CSIRO, University of Queensland, Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology). There were however, two regional campuses of universities located elsewhere - namely the University of Southern Queensland and Central Queensland University.

In some areas for investment, networks had to be completely rebuilt and a considerable commitment made to capacity building of organisations (including industry) to partner with the regional body to deliver outcomes.

Peter Oliver once suggested that all partnerships could be viewed within the analogy of marriage with 45% of first marriages, 65% of second marriages and 75% of third marriages ending in divorce (Oliver *et al*, 2005).

Back in the 'early years' of NHT2, some partnerships were more like marriages of convenience – 'we need you and you need our funding' but *we don't need to like each other*. Gradually, as mutual trust grew and through the common goals established during the planning process, less of our relationships ended in divorce with second and third marriages (partnerships with the same partners) bucking the divorce trends and proving more successful as we learned to understand our partners better.

Once momentum started to build, the 'ground up' model has proven remarkably successful building *stronger and genuinely collaborative partnerships*. By seeking feedback from the beginning, community groups had ownership of their issues and were generally keen to participate in addressing problems.

In addition, the regional body wasn't bound by the constraints to fund foundational / research and resource assessment activities that limit our State Agency partners. This sizable

investment was matched by our Agencies, Local Government, industry groups, non-government organisations, community groups and research organisations and resulted in a considerably improved regional dataset to inform future on-ground works and planning.

But where to now under Caring for our Country

Depending on whether your glass is half full or half empty, you may feel that the latest iteration of NHT3, now referred to as Caring for our Country (CfoC), is an opportunity to do business even better or a backwards step.

Personally, I believe that in Queensland, regional arrangements were finally finding their stride. The regional model recognised regional issues and priorities and provided a positive and highly successful delivery mechanism to achieve sustainable management of our region's rich natural resources.

The new approach appears to be an attempt on the part of the 'new' Australian Government to distance itself from any programs initiated by the 'old' Australian Government whether these were considered good or bad. Granted, the 'new' Government has committed \$200M to be spent over 5 years rescuing the Great Barrier Reef (through the Reef Rescue Program). But few people outside our sector would appreciate that this funding is focussed almost entirely in the agricultural industry and provides no mitigation for threats like Climate Change or urban runoff like storm water (the latter considered a State Government responsibility).

Funding under CfoC has been prioritised from a national perspective largely to fulfil election promises, but fails to recognise regional priorities and issues. More importantly perhaps is the absence of funding priorities or targets specifically for marine resources?

Whilst it is agreed that many on-ground initiatives that improve water quality will have a downstream effect, the argument that all on-ground i.e. terrestrial works will have positive impacts on the marine environment negating the need for direct investment in marine ecosystems has yet to be proven.

More importantly perhaps, the new approach has resulted in a huge backwards step in our partnerships. Having allowed our communities to identify regional issues, these have now been superseded by national priorities for funding. Whilst there is no doubt that incentives will continue to be a big driver for behavioural change and on-ground works, they may not address the bigger picture or encourage greater collaboration or true partnerships. In some cases, it will be back to *domestic unrest* and *marriages of convenience* to secure the greatest cut of the funding pie.

Planning for the future?

Australia is a coastal and marine nation that prides itself on an international reputation as clean and green. In Queensland, we are particularly fortunate with our climate and rich marine biodiversity which are epitomised in our close affiliation with the sea and 'beach culture.'

In April 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea extended Australia's continental shelf by an additional 2.5 million km², giving our country the third largest marine jurisdiction in the world. With this huge extension of Australia's territory, the potential for new wealth from marine resources has grown enormously, as has our responsibility to protect and manage these resources for the future.

A 2008 study, commissioned by the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences, found the total measurable value from marine-related activities in 2006-07 to be over \$38 billion with the sector growing by 42% since 2000-1. The index did not include activities with non-tangible benefits such as social and environmental values.

By comparison, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Agricultural Commodities found the gross value of Australian farm production (at farm-gate) for 2005-6 to be \$35.6 billion, whilst the Australia's Farm Dependent Economy Report in 2005 estimated Australian farms and their closely related sectors generated \$103 billion annually in production (cited by the National Farmers Federation, 2009).

We are not alone - internationally, investment in marine resources is pitiful. To quote Robert Ballard, an American oceanographer and explorer from his TEDS (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk in 2008, "the current annual budget for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) would fund 1600 years of ocean exploration (at the current level of investment) by the National Oceans and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)."

Why is outer space so much sexier than the Earth's great unknowns? For example we have a greater knowledge of the surface of the moon than our own Continental Shelf (which by any calculations has to be more readily accessible) and how many billions have been spent investigating whether there is life on Mars, when we haven't fully mapped the marine life and biodiversity of our own planet?

To achieve true sustainability, we have to seize the opportunities offered to us by the marine environment, increase our understanding and stop treating the oceans as the ultimate dilution solution to pollution. Ocean acidification is already occurring, providing evidence that we have breached the ocean's ability to buffer current carbon dioxide production. Logically, with the oceans covering 71% of the earth's surface, if we are to address complex issues like Climate Change, this is a fact that we cannot afford to ignore.

Key Points and Lessons Learned

- Building an NRM plan from the ground up takes a lot of time and patience – relationships need time to develop - love isn't always at first sight!
- Don't ever assume that "if you build it, they will come" – you may need to build the capacity before 'they' even understand what it is you want them to come to!
- True consultation and building from the ground up has led to stronger, more integrated planning with the capacity to affect long-term behavioural change in NRM
- Good relationships are important and genuinely collaborative partnerships rely on mutual need and understanding
- Don't ever expect the goal posts to stay put – it's good to be a grey area change manager
- Keep pushing the coastal and marine agenda – investment onshore and near-shore isn't enough, it may win votes, but it won't sustain the future.

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