

In pursuit of meaningful coastal community engagement in the Digital Age—a story of reflexive practice

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging with the community is of paramount importance to local government. This much has always been true. Particularly, this has been discussed at past Queensland Coastal Conferences in relation to local government responsibilities for coastal and marine ecosystem stewardship. Maddigan (2009) observed that the community's commitment to and support of long-term best management practice can only come from effectively communicating and engaging with the community about best management practice. The Gold Coast City Council has a longstanding commitment to educating the community about the city's coast, and engaging them in looking after it.

This year, Gold Coast City Council completed an in-service review of its coastal community engagement programs. This project was completed for several reasons. Firstly, we have seen an exponential increase in the methods of community engagement at our disposal. Many of these have emerged from the new frontiers of digital media and social networking. Without proper planning and considered execution, there is a real risk that community engagement across so many mediums could become an "empty ritual" (Mandarano et al. 2010, p. 123). Furthermore, looking at the bigger picture, Local Councils also have an obligation to ensure that programs are delivered in an efficient and effective manner, a concern that is perhaps heightened in the current economic climate. For some time, the idea that community engagement is a kind of intangible or immeasurable benefit has enjoyed currency (Smith 2010). More recently, however, the argument that community engagement should be held accountable to objectives, expected outcomes, and deliverables in the same way that other areas of business have become more widespread (Gil de Zúñiga & Venzuela 2011; Hansen and Spitzeck 2011; Ramirez et al. 2005). The evidence suggests that never before has the need for strategic community engagement been more pressing.

Conducting an In-Service Review is a form of reflexive practice. It provides the opportunity to question whether an alternative approach could have resulted in better outcomes and—if the answer is yes—put the said approach into practice to improve future outcomes (Raelin 1997). This paper shares some of the lessons learnt during this In-Service Review, and reflects on future directions for Gold Coast City Council's Coastal Community Engagement Programs.

BACKGROUND

The city of Gold Coast is highly sensitive to changes within the coastal environment. These changes might be brought about by large storms, development, or innovation in the way we relate to and use the coast. Engineering Services are the asset owners of beaches, canals and some tidal foreshores for the city. For this reason, the Engineering Assets and Planning Branch have a lead role in the coordination and delivery of Coastal Community Engagement Programs.

2011 marks a decade of the CoastEd program, a Coastal Community Engagement Program (CCEP) funded by the Engineering Assets and Planning Branch of Engineering Services and implemented by the Griffith Centre for Coastal Management (GCCM). BeachCare, a second GCCC CCEP, has also been operated by GCCM for about five years. The overall aim of these initiatives is to enhance community understanding of natural coastal processes and management strategies by bridging the gap between coastal decision makers and the wider community (more specific objectives shown in Table 1). It is recognised that community awareness, education and participation are critical to the long-term sustainability of coastal management programs. Without community support, vital capital works to manage the beaches and foreshores cannot go ahead. These works are necessary for social, economic and environmental reasons, and so it is imperative that the community be properly informed about the coastal environment and how GCCC manages it. Recognising this, Gold Coast City Council enlists the support of Griffith Centre for Coastal Management in order to best communicate key messages to the community.

Table 1. Gold Coast Coastal Community Engagement Program objectives

Name	Objective	Approach
CoastEd	Educate the local community on the importance of sustainable management of our coastal and environmental systems	Visiting schools, libraries, information resources
BeachCare	Provide an opportunity for community members to participate in caring for their local beach, while gaining important information about coastal management and the future of Gold Coast beaches and foreshores	Dune planting with the community and community groups
Clean Beaches	Encourage local groups and schools to celebrate the high quality of Gold Coast beaches and tidal waterways	Nominating Gold Coast beaches for awards

CoastEd traditionally comprises local school visits, education sessions out on the city's beaches and dunes and development of education resources. BeachCare holds events out on the dunes on weekends with teams of community volunteers to look after and enhance the dunal ecosystems along the city's coast. To date, both programs have been highly successful at achieving the CCEP objectives, and are well regarded throughout the community. Griffith Centre for Coastal Management coordinates Gold Coast entries into the Clean Beaches Challenge, which has had considerable success in recent years, at both state and national levels.

Engineering Assets and Planning also funds the position of Federation Walk Ranger (permanent part-time). A substantial component of this role is engagement with and support of the Friends of Federation Walk community group.

There are other community engagement programs extending into coastal areas managed by other branches across Council. These include but are not limited to:

- Water Watch (Health Regulatory and Lifeguard Services)
- Mangrove Watch (Health Regulatory and Lifeguard Services)
- Seagrass Watch (Health Regulatory and Lifeguard Services)
- Reef Check (Health Regulatory and Lifeguard Services)
- Coastal waters Clean up projects, Clean up the PIN, the Spit & the Healthy Waterways Clean up contract (Health Regulatory and Lifeguard Services)

This year signifies the halfway point of the 5 Year Implementation Plan for GCCC's Nature Conservation Strategy 2009-2014 (NCS). One of the actions within this Implementation Plan aims to increase support for and involvement in the GCCC Coastal Community Engagement Programs, and recurrent funding over five years has been afforded to this purpose. It was thus considered timely to perform a 'health check' on coastal community engagement programs and identify strategic directions for the second half of this NCS implementation period.

METHODS

This Coastal Community Engagement Programs In-Service Review was conducted over a period of twelve weeks by the Project Team and included the following steps:

- identification of all of the various engagement initiatives undertaken by Council in the coastal environment, and the various personnel responsible across directorates (Current State Summary);
- identification of overarching CCEP objectives and requirements of lead and partner agencies (Workshop 1);
- assessment of CCEPs with respect to key messages and target audiences on the Gold Coast (Workshop 2);
- identification of some strategic directions for GCCC CCEP up until June 30 2014 (Summative Report); and
- development of mechanisms for performance measurement to allow for ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs (Summative Report).

LOOKING BACK

During the In-Service Review, the strengths and weaknesses of the GCCC Coastal Community Engagement Programs were discussed in terms of education and participation.

Education

A shift in focus to resource development has produced some promising results over the last year. Since November 2010, 46 information sheets have been developed, disseminated in hardcopy and made available online. These information sheets relate to either "Discovering" or "Caring for" the Gold Coast coastal environment. Additionally, about 30 minutes of short video clips have been produced that offer insight into the management of our coast. These projects were undertaken to meet increases in demand for quick and easy access to information experienced over the last decade, an increase that the literature attributes to the increase in technology uptake over this same period (Mandarano et al. 2010).

Additionally, the development of an online research library has made historical and current research into our city's coast more readily available to the general public. It is anticipated that this will increase transparency and help to legitimise Council's approach to coastal management as well as community engagement in the eyes of the community (Fisher 2009).

This refocus has not come without challenges. Without a large online social media presence to draw upon, dissemination of these resources internally within Council, as well as to the community was relatively slow to begin with. Capture of feedback on these resources from the community was also limited, in the absence of established mechanisms for capturing feedback and evaluating performance. Finally, it became evident that opportunities to incorporate new research and information into the existing educational resources were incidental and opportunistic and that there was a need for a more coordinated approach on a cross-directorate level within GCCC.

Participation

Participation in GCCC Coastal Community Engagement Programs such as BeachCare has soared over the last couple of years (Figure 1). This participation has delivered tangible on-the-ground

outcomes for the coastal environment of the Gold Coast, with nearly 2000 new plants put onto Gold Coast dunes, and about 650 bags of rubbish and weeds removed from them in 2010-11 (Edwards & Williams 2011). This participation is getting recognised at regional, state and national levels (Table 2). BeachCare is fostering the development of self-sufficiency in its groups, and now has three self-sufficient groups under their wing. It is expected that this number will increase with the development and promotion of the new Building Dunes for the Community and the Coast Guidebook (Edwards 2011).

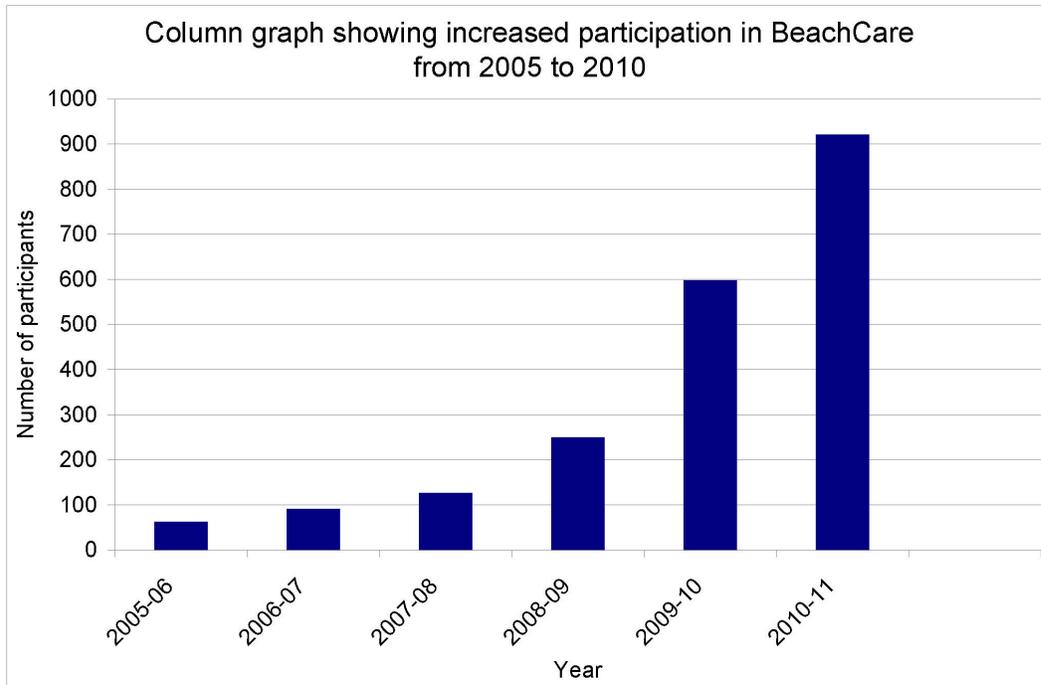


Figure 1. Graph showing increase in BeachCare participation 2005/2006 - 2010/2011

Table 2. Major CCEP awards received 2009-2011

Year	Award
2011	<i>Australia's Cleanest Beach</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Community Action and Partnerships</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Dame Phyllis Frost Litter Prevention</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Young Legends</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Coast Care Community Award</i> (Qld LandCare Awards) – BeachCare
2010	<i>Queensland's Cleanest Beach</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Community Action</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – BeachCare
	<i>Litter Prevention</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Burleigh Heads Beach
	<i>Environmental Innovation</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Kirra Beach
	<i>Resource Recovery</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Tallebudgera Beach
	<i>Energy Conservation</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Broadwater Parklands
2008	<i>Gold Gecko</i> (Gecko Annual Environment Awards) - BeachCare
	<i>Partnerships</i> (Keep Australia Beautiful Queensland) – Federation Walk Coastal Reserve
	<i>Golden Circle Environment and Landcare</i> Semi-Finalist (Regional Achievement and Community Awards) – BeachCare

The In-Service Review found that although the BeachCare program has sound reporting mechanisms in place that includes records of species lists, quantities of weeds removed and number of plantings, these records could be better linked to wider GCCC reporting (e.g. GCCC Threatened Species Database) to better inform coastal research and management.

LOOKING FORWARD

Based on the current state of the coastal community engagement programs, as a result of this In-Service Review, several initiatives are now underway, including

- raising online social capital;
- capturing feedback and evaluating performance; and
- formalising links between researchers, educators and coastal managers.

Each of these actions is outlined below.

Raising online social capital

Community engagement has been defined as ‘an ongoing, interactive process characterised by commitment to ever-changing community needs and interests,’ (Ramirez et al. 2005, p. 261). The literature tells us that the Internet is the ideal tool to facilitate this constantly evolving dialogue, for several reasons. Firstly, that online tools can facilitate direct communication with decision-makers (Innes et al. 1994). Secondly, that there is a positive correlation between Internet use and community engagement (Shah, et al. 2001). Furthermore, online engagement is arguably more purposeful and goal-oriented (Verger 2009). On a more practical level, whilst traditional methods of community engagement require commitment from citizens to be physically present at meetings at certain times, the Internet facilitates flexible, remote participation on a large scale. The Obama campaign is perhaps the most visible recent use of online media to engage the community successfully, making use of Twitter, FaceBook and others to reach voters right across the United States of America.

For these reasons, Gold Coast City Council and the Griffith Centre for Coastal Management are working together to build online social capital through upgrading web platforms, creating online libraries to make their research more accessible, creating a series of educational Youtube clips, and making use of Twitter and Facebook. In order to do so as effectively and efficiently as possible, we have made use of corporate external communications policies, and Griffith Centre for Coastal Management are in the process of developing a *CCEP Online Media Strategy*.

Capturing feedback and evaluating performance

The In-Service Review highlighted the importance of regularly capturing feedback and reflecting on how the coastal community engagement activities are received by target audiences. Doing so offers two benefits: (1) it legitimises the activity by demonstrating that it achieves program objectives; and (2) it verifies the broader strategic relevance of the activity to its proponents (in this case, Gold Coast City Council). A database will be developed this year to record any feedback and requests for information received from the community across the media collateral employed by coastal community engagement programs. Output reports from this database will be consulted on a biannual basis that will inform forward planning for these activities. This kind of data is extremely important in demonstrating the value of these programs through their ability to meet demand within the Gold Coast community.

Strengthening connections between researchers, educators and coastal managers

One of the greatest attributes of the Gold Coast City Council – Griffith Centre for Coastal Management collaboration in delivering coastal community engagement programs is that it puts researchers, educators and managers of the coastal environment in the same room, to communicate directly with the community. This close relationship reinforces Gold Coast City Council’s integrated approach to shoreline management planning. The In-Service Review demonstrated that there are other areas of Council that engage in incidental community engagement in the city’s coastal areas. For example, the Strategic and Environment Planning and Policy Branch maintain a Threatened Species Database online. The BeachCare program collects fauna and flora data across its sites. Input of this information into the database has now been arranged. Also, as part of the *Nature Conservation Strategy 2009-2014*, this branch is completing a coast-wide ecological inventory for the Gold Coast. The information captured as part of this inventory could be valuable material for future coastal community engagement resources, and ongoing dialogue between relevant stakeholders has been initiated. Finally, Council’s Catchment

Management Unit actively works to engage the community across the city's catchments, invariably including the coastal zone. Ongoing collaboration will occur to avoid 'double-ups' and ensure optimum coverage of the coastal zone.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the findings of Gold Coast City Council's Coastal Community Engagement Program In-Service Review, which took place at the halfway point of the 5 Year Implementation Plan for GCCC's *Nature Conservation Strategy 2009—2014* (NCS). Consequently, in order to consolidate and build upon program success to-date, both Gold Coast City Council and Griffith Centre for Coastal Management are working together to raise online social capital; capture feedback; and strengthen links between research, management and education. It is anticipated that strategically pursuing these directions will increase the Gold Coast community's active involvement in caring for our coast.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- Purposeful online dialogue can inspire increased community participation in caring for the local coastal environment.
- Capturing feedback legitimises coastal community engagement programs and ensures that initiatives meet community expectations in a meaningful way.
- A close relationship between researchers, educators and managers of the coastal environment provides a solid foundation for integrated shoreline management planning.

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