

# Coastal Community Engagement: Achieving more than ever before working alongside 14 community groups

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## **Abstract**

Fitzroy Basin Association's (FBA's) coastline stretches 1500 km across central Queensland from St Lawrence in the north to Tannum Sands in the south. Across FBA's coast are 14 community groups dedicated to achieving remarkable coastal outcomes, removing tonnes of weeds and rubbish, putting in thousands of hours on-ground, engaging our local community through public events and managing hundreds of hectares of habitat each year.

Community groups have played a vital role in the delivery of rehabilitation projects across FBA's coast for over 20 years. Prior to 2010, the groups mainly completed works on 'their' sites (mostly in isolation) and ran their own community engagement events with mixed results. In February 2010, FBA brought leaders from each group together allowing them to learn more about other groups; network with their peers – a first for some; share knowledge with one another; and transcend geographic and political barriers. FBA began coordinating community engagement events that were not site based but issue based across the whole coast. With strong support from volunteer groups, FBA ran Wetlands Days, Witness King Tides events, Discovery Days and developed 'CQ Coasts' calendars to become part of FBA's annual coastal community engagement strategy with great success. These activities provided a platform for FBA to communicate key coastal messages and brought our community groups larger audiences to engage.

Bringing groups together with a common interest in the sustainability of Fitzroy Basin Association's natural resources has strengthened coastal engagement and increased on-ground outcomes. The groups now understand more about their peers; share knowledge regularly and have even started working together on projects organically. FBA has developed a deeper appreciation of the group's efforts, strengths and weaknesses to maximise our roles towards improving the sustainability of FBA's coastal and marine assets.

## **Introduction**

Fitzroy Basin Association Inc. (FBA) is a non-government, not-for-profit, regional NRM body that works with a range of partners to sustainably manage, protect and restore central Queensland's natural assets. The area managed by FBA includes central Queensland's coastal catchments, is twice the size of Tasmania, and is the third largest catchment in Australia after the Eyre and Murray-Darling Basins.

Urbanisation in FBA's coastal zone is concentrated around the Yeppoon (Capricorn Coast) and Gladstone (Curtis Coast) areas. Within these areas are relatively small pockets and parcels of public land with coastal assets in varying states of 'health'. Local community groups and members have taken custodianship of some of these areas to address threats to promote healthier coasts voluntarily.

Community NRM groups are unique partners in FBA's region by working on land that doesn't belong to them and therefore provides no productivity benefit to them. Over a two year period (July 2010 to June 2012) FBA ran a large coastal community program with great success. A total of 14 community groups were engaged with a total of 32 projects completed. 50 days hosted almost 1500 volunteers who contributed 5818 hours of effort on ground to improve 482 ha of coastal habitats through weed removal and revegetation works.

As a conservative estimate, over 900 kg of marine debris and 3200 kg of weeds were removed from FBA's coastal habitats.

## **Challenges**

Prior to 2010, the groups mainly completed works on 'their' sites (mostly in isolation) and ran their own community engagement events with mixed results. A survey was performed for each group to identify their 'leaders', demographics, genesis story, successes, learning's, location, networks, skills/experience, equipment, and future aspirations. The information gathered from this exercise was analysed to inform how FBA could better meet the needs of each group. There were distinct correlations between the groups, which inspired FBA to bring them together at a forum.

In February 2010, FBA brought leaders from each group together allowing them to learn more about other groups; network with their peers – a first for some; share knowledge with one another; and transcend geographic and political barriers. Despite FBA's good intentions, it became apparent that the groups still felt strongly about their individualism and a rigorous debate between the groups ensued. The meeting ended with the majority of the groups agreeing that they do share common aspirations and that these forums should continue on a regular basis to facilitate networking between the groups.

These gatherings have been extremely successful at providing a platform for the groups to share ideas and experiences regarding coastal habitat rehabilitation as well as networking and creating synergies between the different groups throughout the region. These gatherings also provide FBA with a unique opportunity to provide education, training and awareness about common themes or issues the groups are experiencing. Follow-up surveys confirmed that every group member believed the get-togethers are vital to networking and discovering current and future partnerships in coastal projects.

Volunteers face unique challenges compared with land owners/managers. A common issue for these groups is that they are carrying out works on public land. This brings about additional coordination efforts with local councils to plan and complete works to align with existing maintenance/management plans. Unfortunately, some of the groups have experienced project sites change tenure/management undoing the 'good work' completed. This is very difficult for the groups as it demoralises volunteers.

The majority of FBA's NRM community groups are not incorporate or GST registered. We engage the groups through MOU's to complete works. Due to not being able to contract the groups plus the nature of NRM funding cycles, the groups generally complete short-term projects (i.e. <18 months). Volunteers are often passionate and ambiguous with their project planning and short term projects with extreme weather events, volunteer availability and competing priorities can be a challenge for the groups to achieve agreed outcomes.

Volunteering in coastal environments is generally enjoyable for volunteers. NRM bodies work in a profession with its own jargon, bureaucracy and technicality that most groups do not engage in directly. Groups face their own challenges on-ground without hearing about the reporting, funding and desktop project management cycles NRM bodies face. There is a distinct and important difference NRM bodies need to understand when working with community group volunteers... one of you is getting paid for their time. It is important to shield groups from your worries and instead guide them towards opportunities where their aspirations and current funding priorities align, then do your best to complete good project work.

The groups have identified a general lack of volunteers (particularly younger volunteers). Groups find it difficult to do as much engagement work and also reach specific

demographics within their community due to limited volunteer resources and lack of technological skills.

Occasionally, groups will be using non-contemporary NRM techniques on-ground (e.g. using non-native species, landscaping rather than rehabilitating...etc.) based on lack of technical understanding. It is important to engage these groups, be upfront with your policies and communicate openly with each other about your expectations. Depending on the willingness of the group to align with your policies it will be important to determine a point of effort whereby you will not pursue them or support their activities that don't align to your policies. Investing too much of your limited time trying to bring about a mindset change that may not happen will reduce the amount of support that could be provided to other groups that are doing good work. Be aware of getting groups 'offside'. Try to always leave things on amicable terms with groups by being professional with your communication.

### **Opportunities**

NRM groups are in a position to empower their local community groups. Our position in these types of projects provides us with a unique perspective to engage our communities in theoretical and practical coastal NRM. It is a space where networks from industry, tourism, government, community groups and the wider community come together.

NRM bodies have an opportunity to facilitate gatherings of their community NRM groups. The benefits of these gatherings include (but are not limited to): combining efforts on-ground; groups partnering organically; latest technologies/practices being communicated between the groups; and, improves efficiencies. NRM bodies have a business model whereby if we achieve our goals we would no longer need to exist. Encouraging community NRM groups to work together leads to sharing of resources to achieve greater NRM outcomes and is a positive step towards ongoing partnerships on our coasts. When groups communicate and partner with one another they are able to share lessons learned and improve efficiencies by avoiding pitfalls each other have experienced.

NRM groups have skills in delivering scientific information in plain English to our communities. Due to the synergies of our coastal community NRM groups, FBA began running larger community NRM events. The groups ran events individually for many years with some success. The more successful ones attracted up to 30 people for events like World Wetlands Day. At the event, there were a couple of stalls hosted by community groups or agencies with topical information. On the back of the group get-togethers, FBA worked to expand these events using its skills in media and communication. We also utilised our NRM networks to attend the event and run tours, presentations, interactive activities for all ages and giveaways. Committing to larger events provides a better economy of scale for engagement opportunities. Annual events like World Wetlands Day went from attendance of 30 people to over 200 in two years.

FBA has started organising training for the groups in getting the most out of current volunteers, how to keep volunteers interested and engaging youth through social media. It takes a considerable amount of effort behind the scenes for volunteers to organise and participate in events or put together media releases. FBA and our sub-regions have provided support to the groups with this type of work while providing them with training and building their capacity. Another opportunity for NRM groups regarding events is to target the non-converted. Using existing events like the Green Crosses Witness King Tides event attracted a section of the community that wouldn't ordinarily attend strictly NRM focussed events (e.g. wetlands days). Focussing on the impacts of sea level rise, FBA was able to coordinate relevant stakeholders (councils, government agencies and community groups) to provide attendees information on what they can do to improve the condition of their local coastal environments (e.g. support their local groups and reduce land sourced marine debris) in the

face of sea level rise. Groups identified engaging new community members as a priority and these events provided community groups support and opportunity to improve volunteer numbers.

FBA identified a number of opportunities to support groups to achieve higher levels of volunteer retention. FBA commissioned training from experts in volunteer groups to provide new knowledge and tools directly to the groups. Some of the key ways to improve retention identified through the training was the need to plan, measure, communicate results and celebrate success. Over the last two years, FBA has developed project development processes that the groups work through to make clearer project plans. This provided better clarity of expectations between both FBA and the group's members.

The value of measuring project outcomes cannot be understated. One particular group had been removing Mother of Millions (*Bryophyllum delagoense*) from a 6 ha project site for over 5 years. It became one of the least attended volunteer activities due to strong sense of feeling overwhelmed by the infestation. Fish-scales were introduced to weigh the tonnage of weeds removed per effort. Although the methodology was not scientifically rigorous, it helped volunteers feel that their efforts were validated by knowing the quantity of their efforts. FBA believes that the effectiveness of quantifying efforts will be further enhanced by incorporating monitoring methodologies to provide information of trend over time.

Communicating results to all interested parties is vital. This provides another level of validation of efforts for volunteers to see their good work being spread amongst the community they care about. NRM groups, councils and funders require this information to keep track of on-ground activities and for future reference. This is particularly important when returning to a previous project site to analyse the results of previous on-ground works.

Above all else, celebrate your successes. Keeping in mind all the above information about the challenges and opportunities, at regular intervals you need to down tools and acknowledge the successes of your community NRM groups. Plan for this in your programs and the reward to the groups, your personal job satisfaction, the local environment and the wider community will be significant.

### **Take Home Message**

- Appreciate the context in which your coastal community NRM groups work within
- Coastal community NRM is not simple- but the pay-off is great
- Plan- keep across local development plans and try to focus volunteers efforts at 'safe' project sites
- Be efficient with your efforts- focus your support strategically with groups that align to your policies
- Be on-ground- this is key to building rapport with the groups and understanding what it takes to do what they do
- Do your best to plan for opportunistic activities- the coast is dynamic and opportunities for short term project work may arise
- Measure efforts and make sure your spruik about it
- Celebrate the successes of your groups at regular intervals
- Groups are the pulse of the community; meaningful partnerships will provide an insight into what's happening on-ground in your region

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