

Overcoming barriers to coastal sustainability and facilitating improved delivery of regional management: A Case Study of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group

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Abstract

The Sydney Coastal Councils Group Inc. (SCCG) is a Regional Organisation of Councils (ROC) that represents 15 Councils in the Sydney coastal region. The aim of the Group is to promote co-ordination and cooperation between Member Councils on environmental and natural resource management issues. The activities of the Group assist Member Councils address overarching barriers to achieving coastal sustainability in the region. These include; the complexity of coastal zone management in the context of regional Natural Resource Management (NRM) delivery; the loss of programs and lack of an independent advocate for coastal management.

This paper highlights the benefits to Councils of participating in a regional body that advocates and facilitates improved coastal management. Through case study examples of the policy and programs of the SCCG, the paper provides examples of strategies to overcome barriers to sustainability from a regional perspective. Case studies include:

- **Coordination:** Regional coordination of 15 Councils at all levels;
- **Capacity Building:** Through the provision of technical information and resources on key regional management issues;
- **Partnerships:** Stakeholder support and participation for the regional delivery of NRM;
- **Advocacy:** Advocating for improved management, education and resources on key environmental issues including water conservation, climate change, regional planning and biodiversity protection; and
- **Education:** Coordinating and promoting education programs.

This work demonstrates the benefits of being proactive and forming partnerships to overcome barriers to coastal sustainability and provides models that can be applied to other regions. Through membership of a ROC that focuses on coastal environmental issues, Member Councils benefit from an increased capacity to implement coastal sustainability initiatives.

Introduction

The coastal zone is one of Australia's greatest assets and the capacity to ensure ecologically sustainable use and development within the coastal zone is important to all Australians (NRMMC 2006). In the past 50 years the coastal zone in many areas of Australia has experienced significant increases in population, tourism and intensive residential, industrial and commercial development. This increased development has led to a degradation of many fragile coastal ecosystems (SCCG 1998, 2006).

In NSW coastal management and planning is undertaken by all spheres of government in consultation with community groups, research organisations, industry and non-government organisations (SCCG 1998, 2006). Local Government play a significant role in coastal zone management. The role Council's play in planning and managing the coastal zone includes, but is not limited to, detailed land use planning and decision making, infrastructure provision, land management and Natural Resource Management (ALGA 2005a).

SCCG has found that the complexity of coastal zone management in the context of regional NRM delivery, the loss of programs and lack of an independent advocate for coastal management are significant barriers to achieving improved coastal management in the Sydney Region. Middle (2004) lists thirteen barriers to good policy making for the coastal zone and highlights the three most significant barriers to making good coastal policy as:

- The lack of integration between and across government;
- Inadequate and inappropriate public consultation; and
- The lack of resources and the inefficient application of existing resources.

Thom and Harvey (2000) identify four triggers for 20th Century reform of coastal policy. These are global environmental change, sustainable development, integrated resource management and

community awareness of management issues and participation in decision making. Each of these has occurred across federal, state and local government levels in Australia (Thom and Harvey 2000). Despite these triggers for reform and the 29 National and State inquiries into coastal zone management in Australia that have been undertaken over the last 30 years the barriers experienced by the SCCG and identified by Middle (2004) still persist.

The SCCG, established in 1989, represents 15 Local Governments adjacent to Sydney marine and estuarine environments and associated waterways. The principal aim of the Group is to promote cooperation between, and coordination of actions of Member Councils in consultation with the broader community on issues of regional significance concerning the sustainable management of the urban coastal environment.

The SCCG is a voluntary Regional Organisation of Councils established under the provisions of sections 355, 357 and 358 of the NSW *Local Government Act* 1993. The functions and powers of the Group are provided in its Constitution. The Group was incorporated in February 1998 under the *Associations Incorporation Act* 1984.

Middle (2004) observes that strong leadership in the form of a “champion” and ongoing learning are key elements of the development of good coastal policy. Each of these is essential to overcoming the existing barriers. With this sentiment in mind SCCG aims to support its Member Councils through assisting to advocate, develop, coordinate and implement consistent coastal management policy and programs. The underlying goal is to facilitate better governance for the coastal zone of Sydney. The Group operates under five core outcome statements.

1. The exchange of information on urban coastal management to Member Councils is coordinated and facilitated.
2. Community awareness on matters related to the urban coastal management is enhanced.
3. The role and capacity of Member Councils to manage the coastal environment is improved.
4. Member Council interests are represented on issues in relation to regional and national coastal management.
5. Sustainable and Integrated Coastal Zone Planning & Management is facilitated.

The aim of this paper is to draw on the work of authors such as Thom and Harvey (2000), Middle (2004), Gurran *et al* (2005) and Stuart *et al* (2006) as well as the experiences of the SCCG to provide a case study of how identified barriers to coastal management can be overcome in a regional context. The paper lists barriers to coastal management and provides examples of actions, programs and outcomes regional coordinated by the SCCG that have attempted to overcome these barriers.

Discussion

This section of the paper provides eight case study examples of activities and programs undertaken by the SCCG to overcome existing barriers to sustainability and focus on the key areas of:

1. Coordination
2. Capacity Building
3. Partnerships
4. Advocacy
5. Education

1. Coordination

To minimise the negative impacts of barriers to coastal zone management, Middle (2004) recommends Governments recognise that a lack of integration leads to inefficiencies and less than optimal management. Consistent with this the SCCG was established in 1989 with a key focus being to facilitate the exchange of information on urban coastal management amongst member councils. The primary outcome of this focus is the exchange information, ideas and expertise to identify and address regional issues, solutions and projects.

Case Study 1: Facilitating ongoing coordination

The process through which the SCCG achieves ongoing coordination of 15 Councils and external stakeholders is through the facilitation of committees and working groups made up of elected representatives, professional council staff and representatives from State Government agencies, non-government organisations, research institutions and the community.

These committees and working groups address key priorities and areas of concern. Committees the SCCG facilitates include:

- SCCG Full Group, Executive and Technical Committees,
- SCCG Beach Management Working Group
- SCCG Business Management Plan (Strategic Plan) – Directional Committee,
- SCCG Coastal Risk Management Working Group,
- SCCG Geotechnical Expert Panel (and National Observer Group),
- SCCG Great Ocean Walkway Working Group,
- SCCG GIS Investigations Working Group,
- SCCG Groundwater Investigations Working Group,
- SCCG / Macquarie University Partnership Advisory Committee,
- SCCG Caulerpa taxifolia Task Force,
- SCCG Education Committee.

The purpose of these committees and working groups is to assist Member Councils with the development of action oriented strategic frameworks to focus and guide coastal planning and management practices. An additional benefit of coordinating committees consisting of a range of organisations and stakeholders is the sharing of experience, knowledge and associated solutions. A result of this is maximising limited resources of many Councils. This model provides an integrated and cooperative approach to coordination in the Sydney region.

In facilitating this process SCCG has learnt many things. Communication between stakeholders within the region is essential to increasing the capacity of all Councils. Driving communication at a regional scale requires cooperation amongst a large number of stakeholders and is often difficult to achieve.

Overall, it relies on a single body (SCCG Secretariat) to drive and coordinate in an organised and efficient manner. In facilitating committees and working groups, SCCG works to prepare for all meetings to ensure that the time of meeting attendees is not wasted and all stakeholders are informed, motivated and able to make an invaluable contribution.

While the coordination of committees is an endeavour that requires a significant time investment on the behalf of the SCCG Secretariat and Member Councils, it is a process that leads to the identification of regional projects and implementation solutions. This results in the increased capacity of all stakeholders and positive environmental and social outcomes. Therefore, it is an essential strategy in overcoming barriers related to a lack of integration as identified by Middle (2004).

2. Capacity Building

ALGA (2005a) identifies the main barriers for Councils to improving the policy and management of the natural resource base in the coastal zone are the lack of adequate funding, trained staff and planners. In a regional context SCCG believes that ongoing learning of all Councils from a diverse regional grouping of Councils in the region is essential to increasing the capacity of these councils.

Increasing the capacity of all Councils in a region as diverse as Sydney is difficult, due to limited resources and competing priorities. The experience of SCCG, Middle (2004) and Stuart et al. (2006) is that increased capacity of Councils through ongoing learning is important especially where there is uncertainty about the science associated with an issue and delaying policy development and implementation is not an option due to immediate pressures, institutional drivers and community expectations.

Two pressing areas of management identified by Councils in the Sydney coastal region are addressing the impacts of climate change and the management of groundwater resources. To tackle each of these current issues the SCCG has undertaken specific regional projects to encourage Councils to consider these issues as well as local and regional solutions. The outcome has been the development of a process that facilitates councils identifying regional issues, working together and with other stakeholders to develop solutions and identifying methods for implementation. This provides Councils with a vehicle for ongoing learning as well as necessary tools and resources to address specific issues.

Case Study 2: A Systems Approach to Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategies in Metropolises

Local Government is beginning to address the impacts of climate change through a range of activities. Many Councils believe that issues related to the uncertainty of impacts of climate change, the need for a consistent approach to managing climate change and the cost of capital works are preventing adapting to the impacts of climate change (SCCG 2005). Due to this the SCCG is working with research institutions such as the CSIRO to undertake projects that build the capacity of member councils to mitigate and address the impacts of climate change.

The SCCG in partnership with two CSIRO Divisions (Sustainable Ecosystems, and Marine and Atmospheric Research) is undertaking a significant project through funding from the Australian Greenhouse Office - Urban Integrated Assessment Programme to undertake a project titled "A Systems Approach to Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategies in Metropolises". The project is seeking to inform the region's coastal Councils regarding the potential biophysical changes that climate change may cause in the region and the associated identification of key vulnerabilities, with subsequent emphasis on examining local capacities to adapt to these climate change impacts. These activities are being carried out in a series of stages: i) vulnerability mapping; ii) stakeholder consultation; iii) assessment of adaptive capacity; iv) project assessment.

Case Study 3: The Groundwater Management Handbook – A Guide for Local Government

A survey of SCCG member councils in 2004 found that groundwater management at Local Government level was ad-hoc with varied community and industry understanding. Development of the *Groundwater Management Handbook – A Guide for Local Government* in consultation with the SCCG Groundwater Management Working Group provided a mechanism through which member councils could share their knowledge and experience on groundwater management with the relevant NSW Government Departments and research organisations. The Handbook assist all stakeholders understand and better manage groundwater more consistently and sustainably.

The key outcome of the Handbook is to provide stakeholders with greater confidence and capacity in the management and assessment of groundwater resources in relation to development assessment and control, protection of groundwater dependent ecosystems and utilisation of groundwater resources.

In developing and undertaking activities to build the capacity of Councils regionally a number of issues need to be considered. Most importantly, the capacity of individual Councils to address coastal management and sustainability issues is highly variable. Additionally, the involvement of all councils in the regional identification of projects and solutions it is essential to ensuring councils have ownership of the outcomes to ensure successful implementation. Further facilitation of the sharing of experience, resources and learning amongst councils is essential to facilitating meaningful ongoing learning that results in building the capacity and institutional knowledge of all councils in the region.

Many surveys and reports including Middle (2004), ALGA (2005a) and ALGA (2005b) have highlighted the need for councils to receive additional support to increase their capacity to deliver sustainable coastal management. Through the actions outlined above, SCCG has developed a framework for the development of tools and resources that result in the increased capacity of councils to manage the coastal environment.

3. Partnerships

Gurren *et al* (2005) identify enhancing existing sources of funding for local government initiatives and facilitation of local government access to environmental, demographic and economic data and expertise as two key strategies to address emerging coastal management issues. The development of regional partnerships is an action SCCG believes to be very important to facilitating sustainable and integrated coastal zone planning and management.

SCCG supports Councils participating in regional NRM groups such as Catchment Management Authorities. ALGA (2005a) has found that most Councils do not believe their regional plan adequately addresses their local coastal zone management issues. Additionally, for the range of coastal zone management activities that Councils undertake requires more funding to maintain programs such as Coastcare and the (*re-establishment of the*) Coasts and Clean Sea program (ALGA 2005a).

The experience of SCCG is that repeated restructuring of regional bodies and funding mechanisms on a National and State basis leads to a significant loss of continuity and momentum in programs and associated outcomes. In light of this, SCCG participates in a number of partnerships that aim to work with existing frameworks for the delivery of NRM and establishing ongoing programs that are not dependent on changing funding initiatives from State and Commonwealth Governments.

Case Study 4: Coordination with other Regional Organisations of Councils in the Sydney Region

The SCCG has recently facilitated informal meetings between representatives of other Regional Organisation of Councils (ROCs) in the Sydney region. The aim of these meetings is to outline activities and areas of work where overlap between the ROCs present and identify opportunities for the development of joint projects. Overall this increases coordination and communication amongst each of these organisations and the councils they represent. Issues and projects identified by participants as suitable for joint collaboration have included:

- Biodiversity management (cross boundary management of biodiversity values and Green Web).
- Planning reform (provision of information, assisting implementation, advocating the needs of Member Councils).
- Water saving and reuse projects (Water Tank Subsidy Schemes, regional water saving and recycling projects and associated education campaigns).
- Linking with other organisations such as Environment NGOs and CMAs.
- Joint submissions as opportunities arise.

Case Study 5: Institute of Environmental Studies UNSW Partnership Program

The SCCG and the Institute of Environmental Studies (IES) at the University of New South Wales entered into the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) partnership agreement in 2004. The program is designed for the SCCG, its Member Councils and the IES to jointly focus on addressing contemporary and strategic environmental management issues. Through a project nomination process, the SCCG and Member Councils submit research proposals for projects that are to be undertaken by Students as part of the Masters program. Projects include a number of disciplinary and/or sector perspectives with the principal objective of advancing the management framework of sustainability. Each project involves a critical literature review that can be expanded to include the application of best practice applied techniques and models.

Case Study 6: Department of Physical Geography at Macquarie University

The SCCG has developed a partnership program with the Department of Physical Geography at Macquarie University. A partnership MOU signed off in 2005 has been agreed to by both organisations and includes a commitment to develop and undertake workshops, long and short term research projects, industry guest lectures and participation in academic advisory boards. The objectives of the program include:

- 1) To promote academic cooperation which enhances the above mentioned goals.
- 2) To encourage visits by staff between our institutions for the purpose of engaging in research, and
- 3) To foster the exchange of academic publications and scholarly information.

There are two clear benefits to these activities. Firstly, working with relevant stakeholders in the region maximises the resources of all stakeholders through the coordination of existing activities. It also provides the opportunity to investigate gaps in existing projects and funding needs for the delivery of coastal natural resource management initiatives with the regional bodies responsible for the distribution of funding.

Secondly, it bridges the gap between policy/management and science, which has been a key focus of the SCCG for many years. From these partnerships, it has been identified that the provision of technical information in a condensed format is valuable to communicate the importance of particular issues to both council staff and elected representatives. Strategies such as this are important to address emerging coastal management issues identified by Gurren *et al* (2005) and maintaining continuity and momentum of programs.

4. Advocacy

There has been a steady evolution of legislative and other measures to regulate coastal management and planning in NSW (Thom 2004). One of the drivers for this evolution of policy has been greater stakeholder awareness of management issues and greater community participation in decision making (Thom and Harvey 2000, Thom 2004). Unfortunately this has not always resulted in an improvement in coastal management. A lack of integration between and across governments combined with inadequate and inappropriate consultation with stakeholders has prevented the successful implementation of coastal policy (Middle 2004).

Another barrier preventing the development of improved coastal management identified by SCCG is that policies will often fail to be developed or implemented if there is inadequate political support within government and corresponding grant programs. This also effects the allocation of resources to government agencies or other stakeholders to address specific issues (Middle 2004). One example of evolving policy where Councils are seeking increased policy guidance and funding is in relation to beach nourishment.

Case Study 7: Promoting Sustainable Beach Management Options

With the pressures facing beach and foreshore areas due to coastal recession, climate change, and recreational usage, the SCCG formed a Beach Management Working Group in late 2005.

The Working Group includes Councils, interagency and research representatives and aims to assist with finding solutions to the beach erosion and protection issues. The Working Group is providing a forum for discussion and activities in relation to beach management processes, issues and needs now and into the future. It provides a link between SCCG member councils, State and Commonwealth Government Organisations, academia, industry and the community.

In late 2005, early 2006, as part of the activities of the SCCG Beach Management Working Group, the SCCG wrote to all 38 coastal councils in NSW requesting information on each councils views on beach nourishment and support for an investigation into the impacts and opportunities of offshore sand mining. Other Working Group activities include:

- Preparing the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program grant application for investigation Sydney offshore sands and their suitability for Beach nourishment valued at \$100,000 (still pending notification)
- SCCG engagement of Dr. Roy and Dr. Cowell to provide a report on sand deposits of the NSW inner continental shelf (completed)
- Successfully securing grant funding via the NSW Greenhouse Office to undertaking a PhD research project entitled "*Quantifying the Value of Sydneys (NSW) Beaches* in order to assess cost / benefit of necessary coastal protection / abatement measures as a result of enhanced climate change impacts".

In undertaking these example activities, the SCCG is providing information and advocating a solution to government agencies, elected representatives and the community that will improve the capacity of Councils to deliver a sustainable coastal environment. This provides a vehicle for influencing both local and state coastal policy and ensures ongoing recognition of the important role Councils play in the delivery of sustainable coastal management. SCCG has found this process together with some targeted media activity raises State Government and community awareness on environmental as well as the needs of Councils to address these issues.

5. Education

Middle (2004), notes that a lack of community support and understanding of environmental problems is a barrier to improving coastal management. Through assistance with coordination and promotion of Council education activities, the SCCG aims to enhance community awareness on matters related to the urban coastal management. These education activities also assist Councils to promote improved coastal management to wider audience in the community than they traditionally meet with formal consultation and participation mechanisms. The education activities SCCG undertakes include: production of quarterly newsletters and monthly e-news, facilitation and coordination of forums, maintenance of a website, various forms of media and promotion of council organised education programs.

Case Study 8: Summer Activities Program

The January Summer Activities Program is an initiative of the SCCG. Since the demise of Coastcare in NSW, the SCCG has taken responsibility for coordinating this regional promotion of education activities during the summer holidays. The aim of the program is to coordinate and promote coastal activities to encourage local communities to enjoy the coast and become involved in the protection, management and rehabilitation of coastal and marine environments. The 2007 Summer Activities Program consisted of over 70 events run though January with over 1,600 people participating in the various events including coastal walks, snorkelling learn to surf lessons and household sustainability advice workshops.

Education is important to the development of good coastal policy. SCCG recognises that coordination and promotion of broad community education as an essential tool to overcoming the barrier of a lack of community support and understanding.

Conclusion (Take Home Message)

The regional coordination of activities that facilitate information exchange, advocate improvements in State Government policy, identify and securing funding opportunities and engage community requires a "champion". The experience of SCCG is that driving these activities improves capacity of councils and assists to overcome barriers to coastal sustainability. This leads to Councils having a greater confidence to successfully manage the coastal environment.

The SCCG also provides an effective model that can be applied to other regions nationally. For example at the 15th NSW Coastal Management Conference (2006), the SCCG was invited to present as part of a symposium entitled "Formation of an Alliance of NSW Coastal Councils".

The Symposium unanimously moved the following motions:

1. Express concern to the State Government of the disbanding of the NSW Coastal Council and prior to the next State elections approach all political parties requesting the reinstatement of the Coastal Council.
2. Support the establishment of a collective of Local Government Coastal Councils.
3. That the Sydney Group of Coastal Councils organise a workshop inviting all NSW coastal councils to look at forming a collective of Local Government Councils.

As part of the preparation of the state wide workshop, the SCCG has prepared a Scoping Paper to assist with coastal Councils considerations of the concept. The development of a NSW Coastal Councils Group similar to the successful SCCG model has been proposed to provide a state wide basis for increasing the capacity for improved coastal management across the state by providing a forum and mechanism for enhanced cooperation and coordination of activities of NSW coastal Councils.

Such a Council alliance would provide leadership, direction and a coordinated approach to coastal management at the local government level amongst its member councils. The Group would advocate on behalf of member councils in support of their sustainable coastal management activities.

Feedback from the Scoping Paper and the planned workshop will also be presented as part of this paper as example of an approach that maybe considered in Queensland.

The work of SCCG demonstrates the benefits of being proactive and forming strong partnerships to overcome barriers to coastal sustainability. Over 15 years SCCG has found that increasing the capacity of Councils in a regional context requires all Councils to actively participate in identifying issues, projects and solutions to existing barriers.

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