

Integrated Regional Coastal Planning in the Wide Bay Burnett Region

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ABSTRACT

Population growth is placing increasing demands on Wide Bay Burnett's coastal resources and without an integrated regional approach to coastal planning degradation will continue to occur. The Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan provides a regional framework for integrating coastal planning with other land use planning and growth management strategies to achieve long-term management actions.

This paper describes how the regional plan will assist in conserving the coast in its natural or non-urban state outside of existing and planned future urban areas. The regional plan sets policy principles that provide for ecologically sustainable planning and management of the coast. These policy principles are consistent with and support the State Coastal Management Plan in achieving Queensland's coastal policy.

This paper describes one of the major initiatives of the regional plan, which is to prepare a Regional Settlement Pattern Strategy and its link with the State Coastal Management Plan's settlement pattern and design policy. The paper also discusses some of the imperatives that need to be considered if coastal planning and management outcomes are to be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

The Wide Bay Burnett coastal region has experienced rapid population growth and a subsequent rise in the number of large-scale urban development applications in the last few years. This has been attributed to the 'sea change' phenomenon associated with the general coastal 'boom' in Queensland. Informal discussions with would-be developers indicates that part of the reason also lies with the more prescriptive planning regime that now exists in South East Queensland. The trend in significant population growth and subsequent development of the coastal zone is expected to continue.

Competition for coastal sites for development, together with the fragile and dynamic nature of coastal ecosystems, poses complex challenges in achieving ecologically sustainable development.

This paper focuses on the effectiveness of integrated regional coastal planning initiatives particularly in relation to settlement pattern policy.

BACKGROUND

The Wide Bay Burnett coastal region is renowned for its coastal landscapes which include the World Heritage Area properties of the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island, and the Ramsar-listed Great Sandy Straits. Other important natural coastal assets include Woongarra's fringing coral reefs, Mon Repos turtle rookery and a

number of relatively undisturbed estuarine systems. The region's significant natural coastal and marine resources underpin economic development, population growth and employment.

In recent years, there has been a trend of 'migration' to coastal areas, largely attributed to people's desire for a quality coastal lifestyles now referred to as a 'sea-change' (see the Seachange Taskforce website). Since 1986 to 2006, the eight coastal shires in the Wide Bay Burnett coastal region have collectively grown by 82,955 to approximately 210,248 (65% increase) (see table 1.).

Medium population projections for the period from 2006 to 2026 show similar patterns of anticipated growth within the Wide Bay Burnett coastal region. By 2026, Miriam Vale Shire is predicted to have population growth of 83.8%, followed by Burnett Shire and Hervey Bay City with growths of 64.7% and 60.0% respectively. The population of the Wide Bay Burnett coastal region is anticipated to be 293,895 by 2026 (Queensland Government, 2007).

Discussions with local governments in the region in 2006 resulted in a conservative estimate of 7,500 hectares of coastal land in which interest in 'greenfield' development has been expressed, with at least 5000 residential allotments and 1000 residential units nominated for infilling development in the existing urban nodes of Hervey Bay and Burnett Shire. In addition a number of significant new marina developments have been proposed.

This growth and potential growth has brought with it substantial benefits and pressures for economic and social development. These benefits have had a corresponding impact on the natural values of the coast. Seachangers have high expectations in relation to infrastructure and services, as many are ex-city dwellers from large metropolitan centres. The 'seachange' phenomenon is expected to continue.

In view of the significant population growth and development proposed for this coastal region, the Queensland Government in collaborative partnerships with local government, business, and industry, Indigenous and community groups has put in place a number plans. These plans build a sustainable future for the region's coast and focus on protecting and managing the very qualities that attract people to the area.

Table 1. Population growth and projected growth by local government areas in the Wide Bay coastal region

Local Government Area	1986 Population	2006 Population	2026 Projected Population (Medium Series)	2006-2026 Projected Population Growth %
Miriam Vale	1,880	5,626	10,340	83.8
Burnett	12,608	28,125	46,333	64.7
Bundaberg	37,994	47,318	57,569	21.7
Isis	4,065	6,345	7,619	20.1
Hervey Bay	18,960	54,310	86,875	60.0
Maryborough	23,904	25,806	27,499	6.6
Tiaro	2,609	5,238	8,025	36.2
Cooloolool	25,273	37,480	49,635	32.4
Total	127,293	210,248	293,895	40.7

Source: Department of Local Government, Planning & Recreation 2007.

REGIONAL PLANNING

Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan 2007–2026

The Queensland Government's accelerated regional planning program, responds to rapid growth along the Queensland coast. The Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan (the Plan) adopted in May 2007, is the latest plan to be adopted by State and local governments and provides a clear direction for the future growth of the region (see Queensland Government, 2007).

The Plan sets out a range of objectives, policy principles and management actions designed to facilitate the achievement of the regional vision, and to deliver a number of key regional outcomes. In relation to the coastal environment the Plan recognises the great potential for land use conflict and coastal degradation if integrated planning policies are not adopted.

The Plan acknowledges the need for each local government to clearly identify those areas where urban, rural living, tourism and marina development can be located and that all dwellings, and future land for development should be located within those identified areas. The Plan also specifies that the location and size of such zones set aside for such development should be based upon the achievement of the environmental, conservation, amenity and hazard-risk objectives for coastal areas.

The Plan also recommends that land not zoned for development should remain in its natural state or in commercial farming use (not rural residential) until existing development zones are almost fully developed.

In addition to the policy position the Plan sets out a range of actions that need to be undertaken which include more detailed understanding of coastal process (including climate change impacts); management and regulation of development in areas prone to erosion, and the need for local government to approve only development that complies with a set of principles (pp37, Queensland Government, 2007). One of the criteria listed is that the coastal urban development is to be consistent with State and Regional Coastal Management Plans.

The Plan is not a statutory instrument, however the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* (IPA) states a local government and Minister must be satisfied that the intent of the Plan is coordinated and integrated into the local government planning scheme.

State Coastal Management Plan

The State Coastal Management Plan was gazetted in 2001 and describes how the coastal zone is to be managed (Queensland Government, 2001). The coastal zone is defined in the State Coastal Plan as coastal waters and all areas to the landward side of coastal waters in which there are physical features, ecological or natural processes or human activities that effect, or potentially affect, the coast or coastal resources.

As a statutory instrument it has statutory effect under the *Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995* (Coastal Act) and guides relevant decisions by the State and local government and the Planning and Environment Court (Queensland Government, 2001). The State Coastal Management Plan is a State Planning Policy

for the purposes of the IPA and hence has a statutory effect on planning schemes and development assessment.

The State Coastal Management Plan (and any Regional Coastal Management Plan) is implemented by a number of mechanisms, including:

- a) relevant planning and land management decision making;
- b) local government through the integration of relevant sections of the State Coastal Plan into planning schemes developed under the IPA; and
- c) non-government groups such as the Burnett Mary Regional Group.

The State Coastal Management Plan also recognizes the need for more effective management of existing development and activities in addition to protecting and managing the resources of the coastal zone.

Regional Coastal Management Plans

The Coastal Act makes provision for the preparation of Regional Coastal Management Plans (also a statutory instrument). While the State Coastal Management Plan sets out the overall policy for coastal management in Queensland, Regional Coastal Management Plans include region-specific policies as well as applying the State Coastal Management Plan policies to a specific geographic area. The Regional Coastal Management Plans also includes resource maps for areas discussed in State Coastal Plan policies such as coastal wetlands, areas of state significance, and areas of coastal biodiversity significance. Another significant role of regional plans in addition to defining regionally specific policies is defining a coastal management district for the coastal region. Coastal management districts can be declared over areas that require special development controls and management practices. In declaring coastal management districts, consideration is given to:

- areas vulnerable to erosion;
- whether the area should be kept in an undeveloped state to maintain or enhance the coast or coastal resources such as coastal wetlands and dune systems;
- public access to a foreshore in an area;
- foreseeable human impacts and natural hazards in the area;
- existing tenure of, interest, and rights to, land in the area;
- planning and development management of the area; and
- Aboriginal tradition and Island custom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people particularly concerning land in the area.

The coastal management district is a trigger for development assessment of certain types of development for which the EPA has a concurrence agency or assessment manager role.

The Queensland Government has gazetted four Regional Coastal Management Plans and currently a regional coastal management plan for the Wide Bay Coast region is at an advanced stage of preparation.

REGIONAL SETTLEMENT PLAN STRATEGY

Coastal planning is an extremely broad field and it is only through on-going policy development, review and implementation that governments and community can make progress in the protection and sustainable management of the coast. One of the major challenges for the Wide Bay Burnett region is the management of coastal development. The preferred settlement pattern policy of the Plan provides an example of a policy that achieves a range of social, economic and environmental

outcomes. The policy also assists in achieving the settlement pattern and design policy of the State Coastal Plan.

The Coastal Plan's policy in regard to settlement pattern and design states 'the coast is conserved in its natural or non-urban state outside of existing urban areas. Land allocation for development of new urban land uses is limited to existing urban areas and urban growth is managed to protect coastal resources and their values by minimising adverse impacts'.

The policy emphasises the need for: -

- existing development on the coast to remain compact and physically separated through identification and maintenance of non-urban areas;
- new infrastructure should promote consolidation and separation of urban areas; and
- new development is preferred within existing urban areas and should be undertaken so as to avoid or minimise adverse impact on coastal resources and their values.

Under the Coastal Act this policy is regulated by the EPA for developments that fall within a coastal management district and coastal building line. Planning schemes for local government areas and land use plans for port areas must identify any control management districts and coastal building lines, and erosion prone areas declared under the Beach Protection Act 1968, within their jurisdiction.

The Plan identifies the need for a preferred regional settlement plan strategy to provide a planning framework for sustainable growth. The strategy includes a number of actions that are closely related to the protection and management of natural coastal assets. The strategy will result in the identification of: -

- developable land to accommodate projected future population growth;
- development of a regional infrastructure plan; and
- development of sound urban planning principles that support a compact, well serviced and efficient urban form.

The preferred settlement pattern strategy is to be implemented through local government planning schemes, corporate plans, capital works and land-use decision-making processes.

DISCUSSION

While current regional planning policies contained in the Plan and the various requirements under IPA for State Agency concurrence and advice provides for the protection of coastal resources to some degree, this may not be sufficient in future for dealing with sustained development pressure in the coastal zone.

Discussion with local and state government concurrence agencies consistently raises a number of issues that pose significant challenges to deal with and resolve, particularly within Integrated Development Assessment System (IDAS) statutory time frames. These include the ability of existing infrastructure to cope with the potential massive influx of coastal development, and whether existing planning scheme provisions provide sufficient detail to adequately address some applications. The EPA is preparing implementation guidelines to assist local government in addressing the State Coastal Plan and any relevant Regional Coastal Plan when preparing planning schemes and for development assessment.

The preparation of a preferred settlement pattern strategy as recommended in the Plan will take time and resources which are in short supply due to the difficulty for both local and State government finding suitable staff.

This problem is compounded by the time taken to prepare plans and to implement the actions contained in the plans. To date, regional coastal management plans have taken four to ten years to develop before being gazetted. This reflects the controversy around coastal development issues and the wide range of stakeholders that have often conflicting interests that must be resolved in coastal plans. By the time the plan is gazetted some policies may no longer be timely, with coastal values requiring protection or management having already been degraded or lost. It is essential for the protection of the Wide Bay Burnett coast that the coastal management district and other provisions of a Wide Bay Coast Regional Coastal Management Plan be incorporated into local government planning schemes as soon as possible.

Incorporating a more prescriptive regional coastal policy in the Plan and implementing it through a similar statutory model to that used for the South East Queensland Regional Plan may have merit, but may also take some time to put into effect. This model will necessitate an increased development assessment role for State agencies. This will result in resourcing issues, due to the increase in the number of development applications that will require assessment for compliance with such a statutory regional land use plan.

The State government in association with local government, and regional natural resource management bodies, has prepared, and adopted natural resource management plans containing, among other things, policy to address coastal protection and management issues. These documents have been well prepared both in terms of public consultation and policy content; however their success relies on the timely and effective implementation of the actions contained in the plans.

The accelerated regional planning model currently being implemented by the DLGPSR may provide a means of delivering more responsive plans that contain policy that address some of the immediate issues facing coastal communities. This approach provides a more effective way of integrating and coordinating government agencies and regional bodies.

CONCLUSION

The need for an integrated planning approach is paramount for the protection and management of Wide Bay Burnett's coastal resources. The Plan and the State Coastal Plan provide policy and direction for coastal planning and management. The Plan seeks to achieve ecological sustainability by planning at a regional level to manage land use and its effects on the environment. The Plan integrates with the State Coastal Plan but is limited as a non-statutory planning instrument.

Both the Plan and State Coastal Plan provide policy on settlement pattern and design. The preparation of a preferred settlement pattern strategy for the Wide Bay Burnett Region will provide a long-term strategy for sustainable development, which will contribute to the protection and management of the region's coastal resources. The strategy will complement the existing State Coastal Plan and the proposed Wide Bay Coast Regional Coastal Management Plan that is being developed by the EPA in consultation with DLGPSR, which provides for the identification and protection of significant natural coastal assets.

The paper also highlights some of the current limitation to achieving planning and management outcomes in an effective and timely manner.

REFERENCES

National Sea Change Taskforce (2007) URL: <http://seachangetaskforce.org.au/Home.html>

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