

Benchmarking Regional Planning Arrangements for Natural Resource Management 2004–05

Progress, constraints and future directions for regions

May 2005

Milestone Report 3

Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project

Tropical Savannas Management CRC



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Front cover photo

Members of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group developing criteria for a devolved grant to invest in pasture spelling, Georgetown, April 2005

Photo: Lionel Pero

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AGSIP	Agricultural State-wide Investment Projects
BMP	Best Management Practice
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
DCQ	Desert Channels Queensland, Inc
DLGPSR	Department of Local Government and Planning, Sport & Recreation, Queensland
DPI&F	Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, Queensland Government
DSD&I&I	Department of State Development and Innovation, Queensland Government
EMS	Environmental Management Systems
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland Government
FNQNRM	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management, Ltd
FMS	Farm Management Systems
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
GIS	Geographical Information Systems
ICM	Integrated Catchment Management
IPA	<i>Integrated Planning Act 1997 (Qld)</i>
JSC	Joint Steering Committee
MER	Monitoring Evaluation and Reporting
NAP	Abbreviation for NAPSWQ (see below)
NAPSWQ	National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NR&M	Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Queensland Government
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NRMSEQ	Natural Resource Management South East Queensland
NT	Northern Territory
PMP	property management planning
QLD	Queensland
QMDC	Queensland Murray Darling Committee
RCGs	Regional Coordination Groups (of Qld Government agencies)
RGMFs	Regional Growth Management Frameworks
ROCs	Regional Organisations of (Local Government) Councils
RPAC	Regional Planning Advisory Committee (for Regional IPA Planning)
SEQWC	South East Queensland—Western Catchments
TS—CRC	Tropical Savannas Management Cooperative Research Centre
WA	Western Australia
WETMA	Wet Tropics Management Authority
WRP	Water Resource Planning

Executive summary

Introduction

This report provides a benchmark of progress in regional planning for natural resource management in Queensland and the tropical savannas region of northern Australia during 2004. It is based on a review of regional plans and planning processes against a set of pre-defined criteria designed specifically to evaluate regional planning arrangements.

Regional policy frameworks are now widely promoted in Australia at the state, territory and federal levels in an effort to provide a strategic response to accelerating technological advances, increasing productivity growth and other pressures on sustainable development. Importantly, the regional turn of governance frameworks reflects a global trend to devolve decision making to reflect the local geographical context. This includes the development of innovative planning systems and approaches to integrate economic, social and environmental policies in a spatial context. It is also an approach that recognises many natural resource management (NRM) issues such as water quality, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources can be best measured and addressed technically at a regional scale—within river basins, biogeographical regions and production zones. Finally, the regional approach decentralises decision-making to enhance NRM at the property or local scale and facilitate a more open, participatory and community-based approach to setting and achieving NRM targets.

By using a set of criteria designed for evaluating regional planning systems, this report ‘benchmarks’ the progress of regional arrangements during 2004–05. This report is the first of two major benchmarking reports of the Tropical Savannas CRC research project Healthy Savanna Planning Systems.

The main goals of the project are to track progress of regional NRM, identify emerging constraints, lessons and adaptive management opportunities for improving regional planning systems.

A second benchmark of regional NRM will be conducted during 2005–06. While this first stage of the research focused on the Queensland experience, the second part of the evaluation will also draw on activities from the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Due to the large scope of the evaluation, the research focuses on the structural and functional links between different players and activities in regions. The project covers the three jurisdictions of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The TS–CRC’s primary interests are the tropical savanna regions within these jurisdictions. However, the project’s partnership with Queensland’s Department of Natural Resources and Mines has provided the resources to include Queensland’s non-savanna regions in the evaluation, see Figure 1, p 13.

Benchmarking regional NRM

Information for the benchmarking process was gathered through interviews with key staff of the regional NRM bodies and state government regional coordination groups (RCGs). Members of the research team also observed some of these regional forums as participant-observers. Desktop reviews of regional NRM plans were conducted and workshops with planners were held to support lesson sharing between regions. The criteria used in the evaluation (see Table 1, p. 16) were organised within a four-part framework:

- **Regional context**—the regional ‘background’ or ‘setting’ in which planning and management occurs, including history, politics, geography and stakeholder culture.
- **Regional structures**—the ‘hard’ parts of regional planning infrastructure including organisations, governance structures, rules, policies and funding structures.

Box 1: Regional NRM bodies and boards

The regional NRM body is the non-statutory regional organisation, endorsed by Federal, State and Territory governments with responsibility for developing regional NRM plans and regional investment strategies under the NAPSWQ and the Natural Heritage Trust for each of the defined NRM regions—there are 15 of these regions in Queensland (see Figure 2, p. 14).

The board is generally the core management committee / decision-making structure for the regional NRM body. The board may be representative or skills-based in design or a mix of the two.

Most regional NRM bodies also include a broader stakeholder forum or council with much wider participation of stakeholders, interests, or sectors than the board and which operates as a more inclusive engagement forum.

- **Processes**—the ‘soft’ parts of planning and management infrastructure including the mode of operation, procedures, and interactions between players and organisations.
- **Outcomes**—including enabling outcomes such as improved capacity of individuals and NRM institutions, on-ground delivery mechanisms and resource condition outcomes.

Synthesis of key findings and lessons

The main body of the report presents findings against the individual evaluation criteria, under the four-part framework described above. However the following discussion is a synthesis of those findings and the lessons and future directions arising.

Thinking regionally, different regions and different models

Most stakeholders associated more strongly with *parts* of an NRM region, as in a district or sub-catchment, or with NRM issues that directly impacted on themselves, their industry or sector. This supports the views of interviewees that stakeholders generally had good understanding of NRM issues and impacts at the local level. However, this was more difficult to articulate at the regional level. There is a strong view that the complexity of NRM and the related regulatory environment is increasing. While general awareness levels are reported to be growing amongst stakeholders, this increasing regulatory complexity has created confusion for stakeholders.

Stakeholders associated more strongly with parts of an NRM region

History of prior arrangements in regions greatly influenced existing working relationships and how regional communities viewed NRM problems. Regional differences in demographics, employment, and land use also created diverse challenges for regional NRM bodies. Matching the planning model of the regional NRM body to the character of the region was a critical factor in developing effective regional arrangements. Regional NRM bodies played a diversity of roles across regions. These roles generally reflected the available ‘space’ left by other NRM service providers or activities and influenced by factors such as remoteness, access to services, impacts of prior planning, or perceived need for coordination of effort.

Matching the planning model and role of the regional NRM body to the character of the region was critical

Regional differences were seen in the approach to targeting funds, identifying priorities, the costs of engagement and in establishing meaningful monitoring systems. An acceptance of this regional diversity and a greater focus on the ends (e.g. achieving NRM outcomes), rather than set means, is required (e.g. compliance with guidelines). Insistence on uniformity risks inhibiting regional appropriateness and innovation. Simply, different modes of operation and roles are required to fill the different gaps in regional NRM arrangements that exist in regions.

Politics, commitment, expectations and culture

An existing culture of collaboration for NRM was generally stronger in regions that had positive past experiences with collaborative efforts, provided incentives for land managers or that had a clear view of regional priorities. Where legacies of previous statutory or voluntary planning were negative, the culture of collaboration was reduced and more difficult to establish. Generally however, the new regional arrangements for NRM were fostering a collaborative culture among stakeholders. Regional bodies and state agency members perceived that this culture, and associated political commitment, was gradually improving over time within government, including in local governments.

Even so, amongst the three tiers of government, State government was perceived to be the least committed, politically, with high variability of commitment reported between and within agencies. This

Box 2: Regional Coordination Groups

Regional Coordination Groups are the regional-level mechanism by which government and community planners formally interact on the NRM planning and program delivery agenda in Queensland.

Four RCGs currently operate in Queensland, namely North, Central-West, South West and South East. Each of these groups consists of representatives from Australian Government and State Government agencies involved in NRM related business (e.g. EPA, DPI&F, NR&M).

Each coordination group is also responsible for managing the business relating to the regional NRM bodies within their region such as providing advice and support for NRM planning and investment proposals. Regional bodies also participate in those fora.

The Queensland State Government defines the purpose of RCGs as:

“...to foster strong community-government partnerships, coordinate whole of government processes and policies, and resolve policy inconsistencies at the regional level.”
NR&M, 2004

www.regionalnrm.qld.gov.au/about/regional/coordination_groups.html

lack of certainty about that level of support undermined confidence and commitment within regional bodies and their stakeholders alike. Political commitment of peak industry bodies was also variable but strongest where there were clear industry interests progressed through the regional process.

Perceptions of a lack of long-term political commitment from governments hampered regional co-operation and progress

Local government alignment with regional NRM activity was patchy in some cases and varied greatly between and within regions. Again, where local governments had a history of working with NRM or catchment groups, current relationships were stronger. Commitment was also relatively stronger where regional NRM priorities matched local government responsibilities under statutes for NRM (e.g. pest and weed management and stock routes). In several regions local governments were directly involved as members on boards of regional NRM bodies and through links with Regional Organisations of Councils.

Factors limiting local government commitment and involvement included concerns over cost-shifting NRM responsibilities by State and federal governments onto local governments. Given the essential role that local governments play in local NRM and in community and development politics at regional level, finding ways to strengthen their engagement is critical to the success of the devolved regional partnership model in the long term.

Local governments' concerns over cost-shifting of NRM responsibilities limited their commitment during the planning stage

State agencies improved alignment of their activities with regional priorities during 2004–05. This was often hampered however by poor disclosure of forward priorities and budgets by the agencies at state and regional levels in negotiations with regional bodies. The State's commitment to initiatives such as the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan was also a catalyst to more serious discussions on alignment of investment in areas such as water quality monitoring activities in reef regions. Undoubtedly the greatest factor in progressing alignment, however, was state government agencies involvement in developing regional NRM plans and particularly regional investment strategies. This occurred largely through the regional coordination groups and helped considerably to clarify roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, including cost-sharing arrangements for management.

Long-term political commitment and regional level operational support by agencies is necessary for large organisations such as state government agencies to genuinely align activities and resources. The NAPSQ and NHT2 program rhetoric correctly acknowledged that this new approach would take time and that some regions would not meet all the program prescriptions in the first years of delivery. However, regional bodies and RCG members perceived that the lack of commitment by government to allow planning and implementation to 'cycle through' properly, constrained strategic planning, investment and partnership building.

In reality, regional bodies and regional arrangements, institutions and sectors needed a chance to catch up. The ten year review horizons associated with statutory resource planning for activities such as water resource planning in Queensland are more indicative of the political and resourcing commitments required to support the development, delivery and monitoring of regional scale resource planning activities.

Expectations of government funding agencies were unrealistic given the complexity of the task

Regional bodies and regionally-based state agency staff also felt they were under severe time constraints given the task set. No policy precedents or tested models existed for the voluntary arrangements in northern Australia, and regional body formation and planning dominated this initial phase of the evaluation. For example, considerable effort was expended from both statutory and regional body planners in 'translating' statutory objectives and policies into the regional NRM plans in a meaningful way. A proliferation of planning guidelines prepared by the State (often prescriptive, untimely and occasionally conflicting) also added complexity to the process. Tensions between government and regional bodies stirred in mid-late 2004. Regional bodies perceived that the State had intervened in NRM plan development at the "eleventh hour" overstepping the community consultation process.

Administrative tasks such as program reporting, consumed a great deal of time. As a result the core business of engagement, partnership development and investment design were greatly constrained. This administrative burden resulted in long time delays for regional groups followed by demands for short turn-around times. This did little to endear the process to regional stakeholders and potential investors.

Government agencies' enthusiasm to get 'dollars out the door' strained efforts at the regional level to implement good negotiation practices, limited co-development and review of NRM proposals and reduced the effectiveness of community stakeholder engagement.

Costs to regional social capital from broken 'commitments' to regional community-based approaches would be significant

Among this setting, however, most regional NRM bodies saw the process as the development of fundamental social infrastructure, with long-term goals fixed on future use and ongoing relationships. In particular, this was critical to achieving sign-up from industry and Indigenous interests so a longer and broader dialogue could be maintained, beyond the short-term imperative of plan development. In this context, it was widely reported by interviewees that the costs to regional social capital from broken 'commitments' to regional community-based approaches would be significant.

Linking scales and activities and coordinating regional effort

Improving the connectivity between management activities within regions and between local, regional and state levels was considered by interviewees as both a necessary means *and* a desired end of the regional NRM approach. Regional planners and agency staff reported gradual improvement in the coordination of statutory and voluntary activities in regions during the 18-month evaluation period.

Initially, significant effort was made to translate statutory objectives into NRM plans, including objectives from water resource plans, regional vegetation clearing codes, regional pest management plans, and, regional coastal management plans where developed. In some cases however, targets in regional NRM plans 'raised the bar' on statutory objectives. Regional bodies recognised the importance of statutory planning and government 'backing' to achieve the agreed targets in regional NRM plans. They were however equally determined to be differentiable from government planning efforts and to progress coordination efforts beyond 'consistent' targets between plans.

Regional bodies recognised the contribution of statutory plans to achieving regional targets but also sought to distance themselves from 'government planning'

Moreover, the responsibility for driving regional coordination was widely accepted as a key role of regional NRM bodies, and one that many regional bodies expressed significant ownership over. The review of regional NRM plans highlighted the emphasis regional bodies place on 'mapping' regional stakeholder networks, alliances, service providers, and other activities and programs within regions.

There are two underlying issues with regional body ownership of the coordination role however. Firstly this allowed government planners to externalise their responsibilities for coordination in regions as it became "the regional bodies job to coordinate" and secondly regional bodies in this context could only rely on cooperative approaches to drive coordination with government business.

There was strong agreement that governments need to address the coordination and integration of their own planning activities for resources and environment in regions

There was strong agreement amongst RCG and regional body interviewees that for improved coordination to occur—or 'alignment' as the preferred term of agencies—serious efforts were needed by governments to coordinate and integrate their own planning activities for resources and environment. One commonly reported symptom of the regulatory and planning 'silos' was the multitude of fragmented property level planning requirements that existed. This fragmented approach to programs and funding currently impede regional planners' ability to design and deliver integrated outcomes. As such, one of the challenges for state governments is to internalise the coordination ethic it promotes. This involves improved coordination of planning, implementation and monitoring activities associated with statutory processes in regions. It also involves commitment to working towards balancing competing or conflicting policy and planning agendas in regions.

There is a key emerging role for regional coordination groups to progress this at a regional level, in concert with state-level policy areas and regional NRM bodies. There is, however, strong resistance and indifference amongst sections of government such as the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation to seriously consider integrated planning approaches through this forum as opposed to basic NHT2 or NAPSWQ program needs.

The gulf that exists between regional development and NRM or environmental management agendas in regions is one of the more critical areas that must be addressed. Links between NRM activities and regional development planning were still weak, undefined or absent in most regions. Interviewees

stressed the need to balance state and regional development agendas and to consider competing interests and trade-offs at the regional scale.

Links between regional NRM and regional development planning were still weak, undefined or absent in most regions

Some regions had begun to explore models for linking regional NRM planning with regional development planning under Queensland's *Integrated Planning Act*, however the nature of that relationship in practical terms is still unclear and untested. There is however considerable scope to explore the sharing of monitoring, engagement and investment frameworks between these activities. This would also provide the basis to address many of the broader social and economic aspirations of stakeholders required to effectively implement regional NRM objectives currently limited by program scope.

Benefits from coordination efforts include improved community engagement practices and stronger industry partnerships

Some of the major benefits to date arising from coordination efforts in regions, associated with regional NRM planning process, have included focusing the debate on linking regional, state-wide and property scale monitoring frameworks. Agencies are also reported that their own statutory planning activities have benefited from improved community engagement practice in regions stemming from regional body processes. This included better interaction with Traditional Owners and partnerships with industry sectors.

Several factors constrained coordination efforts in regions. The more critical of these included an over-zealous focus on 'consistency between plans' by agencies. Government agencies also found the language of 'integration' generally unhelpful and threatening to their understanding of maintaining their own defined statutory responsibilities. On the other hand, 'alignment' of effort and resources was seen as a worthy goal. During the planning phase however this was hampered by the poor disclosure of agency priorities and budgets in regions. Incompatible timeframes, negative impacts of previous statutory planning and few requirements in the legislation to coordinate continued to constrain regional linkages.

Regional bodies and RCG members also recognised several risks associated with poor regional coordination. A critical one commonly identified was the potential for overlap or miss-match between property scale planning investments made by regional NRM bodies with adjustment packages administered by government or peak industry groups.

Subregional links were seen as critical for engagement and implementation success in larger regions

Clear and strong links with sub-regional and catchment scale activities were essential for ensuring effective planning and implementation, particularly in larger regions. Where the regional body had 'grown-out' of existing sub-regional NRM activities or where alliances already existed under NHT1 regional strategy group processes, these relationships were negotiated quite successfully. However where regional NRM boundaries were viewed as arbitrarily imposed or changed, relationships between regions and sub-regions were not as strong and occasionally antagonistic.

A successful strategy that several regions employed in response to meeting implementation needs was developing cross-regional or cross-jurisdictional agreements to clarify and enhance management. These cross-regional links were seen as most critical in remote and comparatively low-funded regions in the rangelands and northern savannas in Queensland.

The health of relationships between regional bodies and Landcare groups was a concern in several regions. In those regions, regional bodies believed they were seen by local Landcare groups to be co-opting the available funds and resources, contributing to strained relationships. As such the future role of Landcare in regional arrangements was still of concern in some regions.

New roles and responsibilities in the regional system

One structure that evolved to help manage the growing need for government coordination was the regional coordination groups (RCGs). Most people interviewed believed that the four RCGs in Queensland had supported a more coordinated approach to program delivery in the regions. More importantly, these structures provided a regular forum for agencies and regional bodies to discuss policy, program and planning business. Some agency staff perceived the role of RCGs as providing technical and policy-based advice to ensure 'consistency' with government business. Other agency

members of RCGs viewed the structures as regional partnership forums. In practice, this dual role created considerable tensions during 2003–04 with RCGs seeking to both ‘partner’ regional bodies and act as ‘assessors’ for their governance arrangements, plans and investment proposals.

State agencies in regions were “still getting used to their new roles” in partnering regional bodies

By late 2004 most RCGs had moved to separate their partnering and advisory functions to resolve some of these tensions. Several agency staff indicated that state agencies in regions were “still getting used to their new roles” in partnering regional bodies.

A major factor in moving towards cooperative approaches in regions was clarification of roles and responsibilities

Respective roles and responsibilities also need to be negotiated for regional monitoring, information management and technical advice. Roles and responsibilities still appeared to be unclear. This was in part because these were constantly evolving and, particularly when NRM plans moved into the implementation phase. The evaluation findings underlined the importance of negotiation as a primary tool for managing competing or conflicting stakeholder roles and aspirations at the regional scale. Negotiation was also critical in allowing stakeholders to explore alternative management, policy or investment options. Board and membership structures of regional NRM bodies and state agency Regional Coordination Group forums were valuable in providing a regular—if not always effective—arena for that negotiation, including negotiation between state government agencies. The approach adopted for target setting and priority-setting processes for regional NRM plan development provided an equally valuable negotiating opportunity in most regions.

Negotiation of specific projects or funding proposals between sectors, agency staff and regional bodies were often the most practical and successful examples of collective action

Perhaps not surprisingly, the development of regional investment strategies (as opposed to the NRM plans) was widely viewed as the critical point for collaboration by state agency RCG members. It was observed that on numerous occasions, the negotiation of specific projects or funding proposals between sectors, agency staff and regional bodies were often the most practical and successful examples of collective action. Focussing on shared priorities and practical management partnerships generally yielded the most productive outcomes.

As discussed in the previous section, regional bodies played a diversity of roles across regions. Apart from their core business role of developing regional plans and investment strategies, several acted as interpreters of government initiatives to regional stakeholders; and provided a focal point for integrated property planning initiatives in partnership with agencies and industries. Moreover, despite the NRM planning process still being under construction there was agreement amongst regional bodies and regional agency staff that regional bodies were establishing a legitimate mandate to deliver NRM initiatives in their regions.

One of the critical benefits of regional bodies is providing alternative (non-regulatory) pathways to sustainable NRM outcomes in regions

Importantly, regional bodies provided alternative (non-statutory) pathways for engaging stakeholders and providing those stakeholders with NRM information and resources. This also included potential pathways for land managers, to work towards meeting statutory compliance responsibilities. For example, regional body implementation staff reported that stakeholders in pastoral regions were particularly conscious of the connection between statutory requirements for pest and weed management and the opportunities provided by regional bodies to respond to those requirements. Regional bodies also provided the benefit of an ongoing engagement mechanism on incentives or information outside of the defined statutory consultation periods.

Bringing knowledge and information together for NRM

The timing of this first benchmarking process, late 2003 to early 2005, was during the start-up and planning phase for most regional NRM bodies. As such, structures and processes for information collation and integrating knowledge become critical points of concern for the evaluation.

NRM planners widely reported that information systems in place in many regions were not fit to do the job. They also reported that data-sharing and technical support relied heavily on the personal commitment of, and relationships with, individuals in state government agencies. It was also apparent, particularly in northern Queensland regions, that state agency technical staff struggled to provide

equitable levels of service across those regions, with the higher profile coastal regions generally capturing the lions share of support.

Information systems in place in many regions were not fit to do the job

In developing workable data sharing agreements, most regional bodies aligned themselves with particular government agencies, such as the Departments of Natural Resources & Mines (NR&M) or Primary Industries & Fisheries (DPI&F) in Queensland. In general terms however, the State Government is perceived to have backed away from its responsibility to provide natural resource information leaving regional NRM groups, in their view, to fund basic 'regional scale' resource condition assessment and monitoring.

Queensland State Government is perceived to have backed away from providing basic natural resource information required for regional management...

...The number of 'interim' resource condition targets in plans (i.e. targets to set targets) was indicative of the lack of suitable and available data on resource condition.

The number of 'interim' resource condition targets in regional NRM plans (i.e. targets to set targets) was indicative of the lack of *suitable* and available data on resource condition. An absence of satellite imagery and quality mapping at appropriate scales were widely reported as critical gaps. Other common gaps in the planning information base determined from a review of NRM plans included basic groundwater and surface water quality data on sediments and nutrients; rangelands' biodiversity data; quantification of landscape change impacts on climate change and regional carbon budgets; understanding the distribution and role of fire; understanding links between socio-economic trends in resource industries and capacity to pay; and, 'mapping' of social or cultural values in landscapes.

... in the two years since the release of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, water quality monitoring programs in reef catchments are still being debated.

Roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions were largely undefined or unclear at best. While there was a common belief that state and national agencies were responsible for long-term resource condition monitoring, coherent programs were not evident. For example, in the two years since the release of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, water quality monitoring programs in reef catchments are still being debated. The potential for coordinated roles for government, community and industry to regional monitoring systems is also yet to be resolved.

Apart from the consequent lack of consistent information to measure resource condition changes and the success of interventions, governments have created cynicism in the regions about their competence on what appears a relatively straightforward technical activity.

Given the poor availability of suitable data in some regions, planners drew quite heavily on the skills and knowledge of regional stakeholders. This knowledge, mostly captured through the plan consultation process, was reported to be highly useful in ground-truthing available scientific information and improving the management applicability of that information to targets and actions at the local level.

Two noteworthy issues arose however with the use of stakeholder knowledge. Firstly, in most cases the process used to capture and integrate different stakeholders knowledge (e.g. pastoralists, Traditional Owners etc) obscured those different 'voices' in the plan. A second issue arose when planners in one savanna region found the funding rules and conditions around ownership of intellectual property presented barriers to the acceptable use of Indigenous knowledge in the project development and implementation.

The expertise of rural industry groups as implementation partners was also widely valued by regional bodies

The expertise of rural industry groups as implementation partners was also widely valued in the design of incentives, communication strategies and property planning investments. Landcare networks were also identified in some regions as 'relationship experts' for implementation.

Expertise from outside the regional NRM body was invaluable in developing regional plans

Also important was the ability of regions to access external knowledge providers. This expertise was drawn from a range of sources including agencies themselves, research institutions or short-term outsourcing to consultants. Several regions also established longer term strategic partnerships with research providers such as Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs), the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) or the Moreton Bay Partnerships. Access to these skills greatly improved the

application of existing resource data to the planning task at hand in several regions. These ‘third-party’ players also helped overcome the bureaucratic hurdles often faced by regional NRM bodies in securing data directly from state agencies, particularly in the start-up phase of planning where data sharing agreements or structures were not clearly articulated. Conversely several regions indicated that poor access to research providers hampered their plan development efforts. Despite the benefits gained from these associations, regional bodies reported considerable difficulties in ‘managing scientists’ and frustration with the scientific communities unwillingness to nominate resource condition targets.

Scientists were often unwilling to nominate resource condition targets

Setting regional priorities proved one of the most difficult aspects to the process of developing NRM plans. Management of multiple values and expectations, and large volumes of data “with lots of holes in it” was problematic for several regions. Approaches for setting regional priorities ranged from structured multi-criteria analysis and use of environmental benefits indices, to consensus techniques, technical forums or combinations of these. Regional NRM plans, however, rarely showed how NRM priorities related to particular locations in order to avoid the perception that particular industry or land use would be unfairly targeted. As a result, spatial priority setting more commonly occurred through the design of implementation frameworks negotiated with industry sectors or sub-regional players.

NRM plans rarely showed how priorities related to particular locations ...spatial priorities for action were generally set later through the design of implementation frameworks

Areas that were problematic for regional groups included applying decision-making technologies in complex, community-based settings. This included considering Indigenous management aspirations equitably in the priority setting process. Apart from better decision-making approaches, better strategic guidance would be provided if the state and national governments had coherent NRM strategies and priorities of their own as a framework.

Regional bodies and state agencies considered property management planning as a critical tool for integrating knowledge at the local level that reflects regional priorities and management aspirations. As such, it was widely promoted as a cornerstone of implementation over the next three years.

Property management planning was considered a critical tool for integrating knowledge at the local level

Capacity of planners, managers and stakeholders

There were significant improvements in social capital including new networks and business approaches, increased respect and credibility of regional community-based NRM and enhancement of individuals’, organisations’ and agencies’ capacity during 2004-5. Considerable human and social transaction costs were also incurred during that time.

A major factor in incurring those costs was the rapidity of changing policy, program and management requirements during the start-up and planning phases and the pressure on regional players to respond.

The ability to respond to rapidly changing operating environments in regions was critical

In responding to that rapidly changing operating environment in regions, regional NRM bodies worked to keep ahead of emerging initiatives, and kept their stakeholders informed through their engagement networks. Sharing experiences and tactics with other regional bodies provided important sources of learning and skill sharing during this time. Structures such as the *Regional Groups Collective* were critical to this. Regional bodies and regional coordination groups reported they are rethinking their operation and composition to ‘gear up’ for implementation and monitoring functions. Over the evaluation period, regional NRM bodies and agency staff on Regional Coordination Groups demonstrated an increasing capability to be adaptive and responsive. This included conducting self-initiated reviews of their representative structures, sectoral agreements, terms of reference or engagement approaches. NRM plans were generally explicit about how adaptive management approaches would be used to review their plans and investment strategies.

Regional bodies sought to build on stakeholder capabilities within their region

As part of the planning process, regional bodies made a concerted effort to understand the social capital and stakeholder capabilities within their region. This often contrasted with funding agency views of regional stakeholders as empty vessels that needed their capacity ‘built’. In most cases regional groups perceived funding and program prescriptions as barriers to innovation and effective relationships with stakeholders. Regional bodies stressed the importance of involving their stakeholders early in any new

initiative as well as a mediating conflicting aspirations between stakeholder groups with as effective strategies for engagement.

Involving stakeholders early in new initiatives and mediating conflicting aspirations between stakeholder groups were effective strategies for engagement.

Regional bodies and their governance structures were generally inclusive of the diverse regional interests. In several regions however there were ongoing challenges in securing the involvement of conservation, Indigenous and marine interests during 2004-5. There was significant progress reported in establishing a sound basis for longer-term partnerships with Indigenous people through the regional NRM process. Tight timeframes impacted negatively on Indigenous peoples' participation. Program requirements also provoked frustration as they disaggregated environmental issues from human health and employment, that Indigenous groups felt were equally important and relevant.

Major resource using sectors such as tourism, Department of Defence and urban communities were notably absent from the table

Major resource using sectors such as tourism, Department of Defence and urban communities were also notably absent from relevant regional processes and plans. Even when pressures and benefits of tourism use were recognised, the tourism sector's voice was difficult to identify and was repeatedly referred to as an external pressure on the resource base. Department of Defence absence is significant due to its role as a major land manager and investor in NRM process. The role of urban communities, as resource users and consumers, was often undervalued with NRM seen predominantly as a rural problem.

Local government involvement in the regional NRM continues to present a challenge as many local governments lack sufficient staffing and resources to participate effectively in regional NRM business.

Many local governments lack sufficient staffing and resources to participate effectively in regional NRM business

Two main models of regional NRM body governance emerged. The first, a representational approach, encouraged stakeholder support and ownership. The success of the representational model sometimes depended on the level of organisation and resourcing within the sectors themselves. Arguably, it was easier for peak industry groups to nominate and support the role of a representative than Indigenous or conservation interests in the region. NRM boards judged to have good stakeholder representation did struggle to 'think regionally' when trying to reach consensus on key NRM issues, particularly during the Board's priority setting.

The second, a skills-based model, improved decision-making efficiencies and the ability for boards to reflect the interests of the 'region' as distinct from sectoral interests. There were limitations however with boards not making best possible use of members' skills as well as risks of being perceived as exclusive, and with poor accountability to stakeholders. Importantly, skills-based approaches also invariably required 'additional' mechanisms to maintain input and draw direction from the broader stakeholder community.

Skills-based NRM boards invariably required 'additional' mechanisms to draw direction from the broader stakeholder community.

The board was not the only mechanism used to engage different interests in regions. Regional bodies found it more appropriate - given sectors' management interests and capacities - to engage at the sub-regional level or on specific project initiatives. Governance arrangements were also in a state of flux as NRM bodies moved from planning to implementation and as board members' understanding of their roles and responsibilities matured.

The evaluation also considered the adequacy of resourcing available to regional bodies. Interviewees recognised the competitive nature of funding resources, however, only half believed there was adequate resourcing for a strategic approach. The high cost of travel for large-area regions was identified as a major factor in limiting this strategic capability.

There were several common skill sets that were regularly reported as difficult to secure in regions. These included extension, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and related data management, good facilitation skills, corporate governance and technical environmental management skills.

The difficulty for regional agency staff to equitably service NRM regions was generating a 'poor cousin' syndrome in northern and western regions in particular. Regional agency staff also expressed concern about the high levels of unrecognised in-kind support required during the planning phase.

Cross-regional agreements became important to resource implementation activities in remote regions

Regional bodies used several strategies to overcome these limitations. These included building their local communities' skills to implement, developing alliances with agency or industry partners. Regions also harnessed skills and support from other regional bodies (acting as service provider role) through cross-regional agreements. These were particularly common to resource implementation activities in remote regions such as Cape York, the Gulf regions, and Desert Channels.

Making things happen: towards NRM outcomes

Many interviewees said it was too early to make a judgement on the outcomes of the process, even about the success of the board establishment and planning phase. Respondents indicated the implementation of sub-catchment PMP initiatives were examples of effective on-ground delivery outcomes to date. However at the time of the interviews (October 2004), a significant number of respondents believed there had been no such outcomes in their regions during this stage. Many respondents reported frustration that the whole board formation and planning process had prevented adequate action on the ground during the period, notwithstanding some valuable *Priority Action Proposal* investments and other ongoing projects.

Despite the negative connotation often given to “just more planning”, the majority of regional body and state agency respondents believed that the preparation of regional NRM plans and investment strategies were, in themselves, significant outcomes and not just necessary steps to “get the funds”. Virtually all respondents commented favourably on the strategic focus they were required to adopt compared with earlier approaches that tended to spread effort too thinly.

There was considerable confidence among regional players that the infrastructure was now in place to deliver regional priorities, at the same time as new approaches were developed for property management planning, application of incentives, and other market-based instruments. Regional plans demonstrated a major improvement in the working knowledge of and commitment to developing monitoring frameworks that connect with local, state and national needs.

There is confidence among regional players that the infrastructure is now in place to deliver on regional priorities

For even the most advanced regional body or set of management arrangements, it was too early to measure on ground and resource condition outcomes. However almost all regional players interviewed expected that the process would result in improvements in resource and environmental conditions. In the short term, there was a common expectation that management arrangements would start to stabilise resource condition and/or prevent further losses. Some people were not sure whether regions had the resources to improve the assets without bigger investments and considerable change in resource managers' attitudes. Regional players were also aware of the potential for external factors such as climate, policy change and markets to influence outcomes.

Regional planners were concerned with avoiding imposing unfair burdens on land managers and regional industries. There was some evidence from plan reviews that implementation processes were likely to adopt measures to minimise negative social and economic consequences of proposed interventions. Several plans committed to undertake social impact assessment to inform implementation of specific management action targets.

Several plans committed to undertake social impact assessment to inform implementation of specific management action targets.

In larger regions in particular, strong relationships between regional NRM bodies and sub-regional and catchment scale activities generally supported well-defined implementation and planning roles. In many regions the presence of prior sub-regional organisations resulted in a significant head start by providing critical ‘social infrastructure’ for engagement on NRM plan development and implementation. The success of this arrangement, however, depended on the ability of regional NRM bodies to negotiate these roles with sub-regional groups in a fair way. Pre-existing sub-regional structures in some regions were also found to constrain stakeholders in thinking more regionally and in a small number of cases confounded the establishment of an effective regional process.

A common view of regional bodies and agency staff was that management “needs to come together at the landscape level”

Resource management partnerships for monitoring, engagement and for property-scale and sub-regional implementation of sustainable land management practices emerged in most regions. These partnerships were between industries, regional bodies and state agencies, and were driven in part by a common view expressed by regional bodies and regional agency staff that management “needs to come together at the landscape level”.

Management partnerships were most effective when based on a specific issue, sector, place or a shared problem

Management partnerships were generally most effective where parties developed specific funding proposals or agreements based on issue, sector, place or a specific shared problem. Recognising stakeholder management aspirations (Indigenous or rural industry), or responsibilities under statutes (State and Local governments) proved fundamental i.e. recognising and working with ‘self-interest’.

A high proportion of management actions in NRM plans were to improve regional monitoring systems

Regional bodies currently face real challenges in adequately monitoring return on regional investment, where regional bodies believed ‘return’ to include sustainable production, equity or cultural outcomes as well as improvements in natural resource condition. Demonstrating and attributing causal links between investment and return is highly problematic in a complex environment. As a result, a high proportion of management actions in NRM plans were allocated to improving monitoring systems although government investors were keener for evidence of on-ground change.

Demonstrating and attributing causal links between investment and return is highly problematic

Tight accountability to government conflicted with the need for regional bodies to also partner government, and achieve the return on regional investment. It is a difficult balancing act for regional bodies to maintain accountability to their stakeholders while avoiding perceptions of “becoming part of government”.

Focus for Stage 2 of the evaluation

The project team will continue to work with our partners to track progress through to mid-2006. The regional NRM process is evolving from the formative and planning phases to the implementation and action phase.

This report deals largely with the Queensland experience. In 2005–06, benchmarking in NT and WA will also be conducted more explicitly. The second ‘benchmarking’ process will involve a survey of regional body and regional agency staff. The evaluation will also seek to expand to include other important regional planning activities and to engage with a broader range of industry, community and government players. The development of several in-depth case studies involving regions from all three savanna jurisdictions will support this objective. Regional investment patterns and trends will also be considered.

Potential case studies, based on emerging themes and key findings from Stage 1 of the evaluation, include:

- Adaptive management of water quality
- Role of the pastoral industry in regional planning
- Regional approaches to stakeholder engagement
- Australian Defence Force involvement in regional NRM
- Indigenous participation in NRM monitoring and evaluation
- Biodiversity information in regional scale planning, and
- Improving links between NRM and regional development planning.

Introduction

This report provides a benchmark of progress in regional planning for natural resource management in Queensland and the tropical savannas region of northern Australia during 2004. It is based on a review of regional plans and planning processes against a set of pre-defined criteria designed specifically to evaluate regional planning arrangements.

Regional policy frameworks are now widely promoted in Australia at the state, territory and federal levels in an effort to provide a strategic response to accelerating technological advances, increasing productivity growth and other pressures on sustainable development. Importantly, the regional turn of governance frameworks reflects a global trend to devolve decision-making to reflect the local geographical context. This includes the development of innovative planning systems and approaches to integrate economic, social and environmental policies in a spatial context. It is also an approach that recognises many natural resource management (NRM) issues such as water quality, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources can be best measured and addressed technically at a regional scale—within river basins, biogeographical regions and production zones. Finally, the regional approach decentralises decision-making to enhance NRM at the property or local scale and facilitate a more open, participatory and community-based approach to setting and achieving NRM targets.

Background to the *Healthy Planning Systems* project

The *Healthy Savanna Planning Systems* project is part of the Tropical Savannas CRC's (TS-CRC) regional planning theme portfolio. It was initiated in late 2003 and will run until September 2006. The overall project goal is to contribute to effective regional natural resource management policy, planning and implementation processes in northern Australia. The research involves building and applying methodologies for monitoring and evaluating regional planning arrangements and the technical content of regional NRM plans.

The project team worked collaboratively with regional bodies and government agencies in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The research process captured learnings, identified innovative options for policy improvement and shared results. It is driven by a strong research ethic that supports 'in-progress' or real-time evaluation of NRM-related planning and the participation of planners and managers in the evaluation process.

Scope of the evaluation and study area

There is no single 'regional plan' in any region. Rather, a diversity of plans and planning activities exists that address various natural resource, economic development, environment and other issues. National programs such as the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality* (NAPSWQ) and the extension to the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT 2) are now the main drivers for regional resource use planning throughout Australia. The NAPSWQ and the NHT 2 focus on water quality, salinity and riparian zone management, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity and coastal management issues. Increasingly, states and territories produce regional plans covering sectors such as rivers, forests, economic development and these too are highly relevant to the composite (if not integrated) planning activity addressed in this project. Local governments have also produced plans, mostly with a land use and infrastructure focus.

The *Regional Natural Resource Management Plan* is a composite of a whole raft of plans at scales from national to local, which varies from territory/state to state, and even within a state or territory. Occasionally, there is a subsidiarity relationship between plans, such as those linking national or state conservation priorities into local planning and approval systems. More often, plans provided disjointed, uncoordinated and even contradictory responses to the same NRM issue. Regional NRM plans also reflected the roles of different players and activities that are part of the 'system' of regional planning. This included statutory and voluntary planning and management activities, industry involvement and other important sectors such as local government, Indigenous people, and the conservation sector.

The prime focus of this benchmark report is to evaluate the aggregate effectiveness of NRM planning in a region through the lens of regional arrangements and plans initiated by the NAPSWQ and the NHT programs—but the scope is wider. The evaluation views the delivery of these programs as important vehicles and catalysts within the regional planning system and the results refer to the new NRM regional bodies and their influence and effect on the development of effective planning arrangements *in toto*.

Due to the large scope of the evaluation, the research focuses on the structural and functional links between different players and activities in regions. The project covers the three jurisdictions of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The TS-CRC's primary interests are the tropical savanna regions within these jurisdictions. However, the project's partnership with Queensland's Department of Natural Resources and Mines has provided the resources to include Queensland's non-savanna regions in the evaluation, see Figure 1.

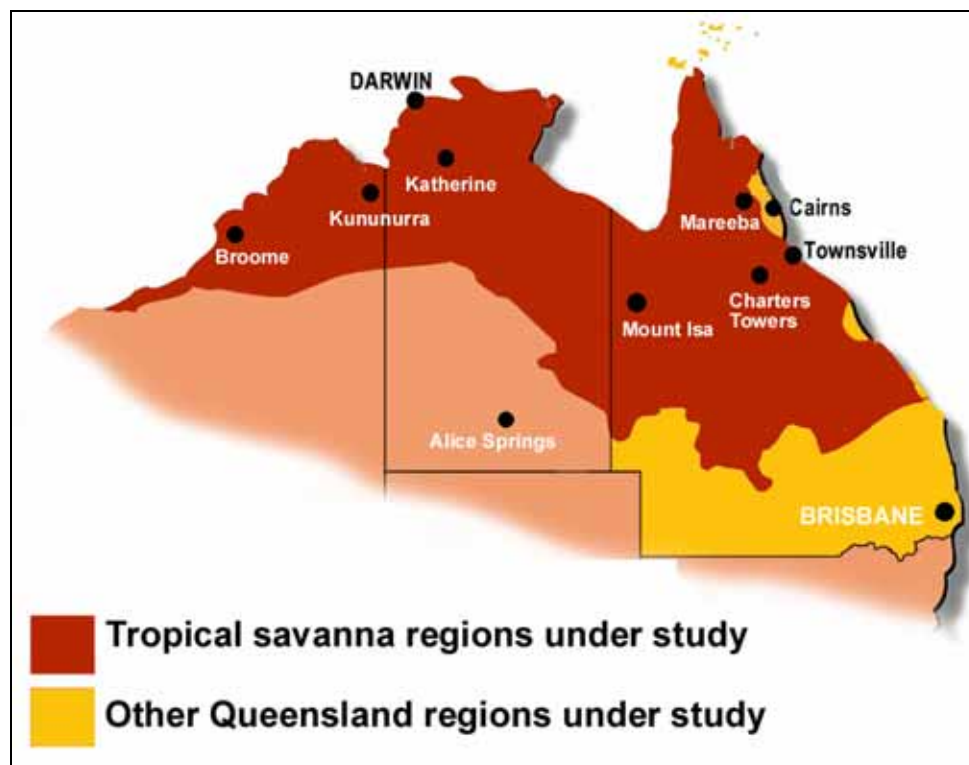


Figure 1 Northern Australia's tropical savanna regions

Links to other research and evaluation processes

The involvement of the Queensland State Government in the project's design, through the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (NR&M), saw the project address one of several tiers of evaluation activity in the state's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for NRM¹. As part of an external consultancy team, members of this project team also contributed to the delivery of the Queensland Government's review of regional planning arrangements during 2004, and to the Australian Government's review of the regional process in 2004.

¹ Queensland State Monitoring Evaluation and Reporting Framework

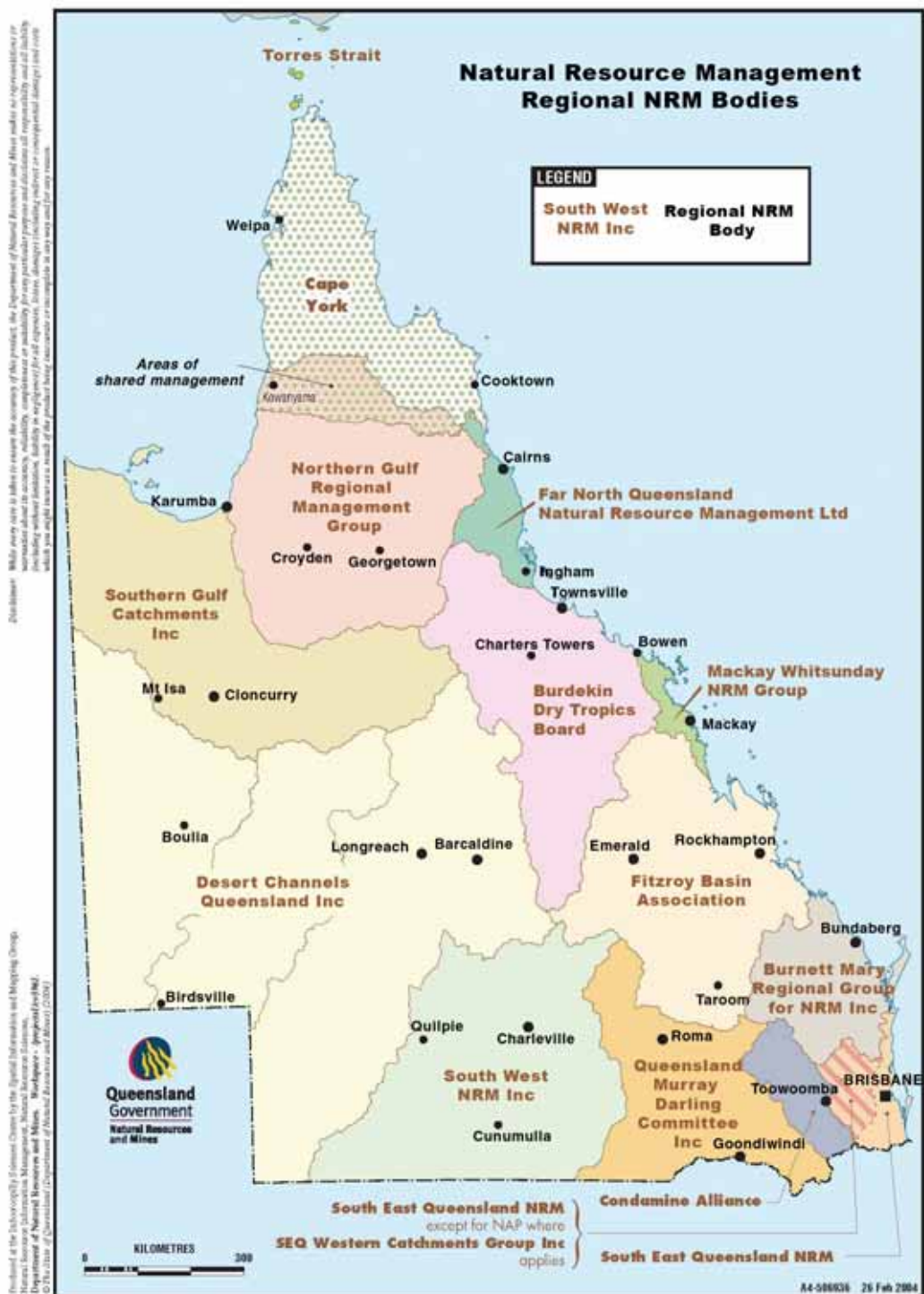


Figure 2 Queensland's Natural Resource Management regions

The benchmarking process

The benchmarking process involved an evaluation of regional planning arrangements against planning systems criteria, which are summarised in Table 1. These criteria and indicators are explained in detail in Bellamy et al (2005).²

This evaluation was undertaken between late 2003 and early 2005. Principal information for the evaluation came from sources including:

- Interviews with key informants involved in regional NRM.
- Observations of regional planning fora.
- Desktop reviews of regional NRM plans.
- Analysis of the policy and program environment in Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland.

Each method contributed an insight into particular components of regional NRM arrangements. These methods were then synthesised to track progress of regional planning arrangements and evaluate this progress against the criteria.

Evaluation framework and criteria

The evaluation is structured within a four-part framework reflecting different aspects of regional planning systems, namely:

- **Regional context**—the regional setting in which planning and management occurs, including history, politics and stakeholder culture.
- **Structure**—the ‘hard’ parts of regional planning infrastructure including organisations, governance structures, policies and funding structures.
- **Process**—the ‘soft’ parts of planning and management infrastructure including the mode of operation, procedures, and interactions between players and organisations.
- **Outcomes**—including enabling outcomes such as improved capacity of individuals and NRM institutions, on-ground delivery mechanisms and resource condition outcomes, or expectations thereof.

Several evaluation criteria were applied to inform the four parts of the framework. These criteria are presented in Table 1. The methods for collecting data against these criteria were discussed in the next section, Information gathering.

The main body of the report presents the findings of the evaluation under these criteria headings.

² Bellamy, J., Smith, T., Taylor, B., Walker, M. *et al.* 2005. *Criteria and Methods for Monitoring and Evaluating Healthy Regional Planning Arrangements*. Savanna CRC Project 3.3.5: Healthy Savanna Planning Systems.

Table 1: Criteria for evaluation of regional NRM planning arrangements

Criteria	Explanation
Context criteria	Recognises that implementation of regional NRM is affected by a wide range of environmental, economic, social, policy/institutional and technological factors
C1 Thinking 'regionally'	Regional stakeholders have a clear identification with the NRM region, an acceptance of its NRM issues and are generally thinking 'regionally'.
C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment	Regional stakeholders recognise, practice, and support participation and collaboration that generates willingness for learning and change. Political commitment is present among key regional stakeholders.
C3 Understanding NRM	Recognition by regional stakeholders of the 'multi-dimensional nature' of NRM, i.e. social, economic, environmental and institutional/political dimensions.
C4 Recognising regional diversity & complexity	Diversity and complexity of the social, economic, ecological and institutional characteristics of the region are recognised and widely understood.
Structure criteria	Addresses the rules and institutional arrangements relating to regional NRM
S1 Coherent policy and governance structures	The degree to which policy, program, governance (and legislative) structures agree in intent, are consistent and logically connected.
S2 Aligned institutions	Institutions have a high degree of integration and adaptiveness to support regional priorities.
S3 Roles and responsibilities	Roles and responsibilities in regional NRM arrangements are clearly defined and understood.
S4 Participation and engagement structures	Integrity and inclusiveness of participation and engagement structures is apparent.
S5 Adequate regional resourcing	Resources are adequate to support regional NRM planning and long-term certainty exists regarding future funding.
S6 Monitoring return on investment	Mechanisms are in place to monitor and assess returns on investment.
S7 Structures for integrating knowledge	Structures that support data and information sharing and integration in planning. Effective information and knowledge management arrangements including access to external expertise, science and science providers.
Process criteria	Addresses the activities, strategies, operations and relationships that define and influence regional NRM
P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values	Regional process and tools that support the integration of different types of information, knowledge and values including target setting, priority setting, and engagement processes.
P2 Capacity to participate	Capacity exists for all players to participate in regional planning, management or implementation processes.
P3 Procedural fairness	Processes that support regional NRM are widely perceived as fair.
P4 Responsive and adaptive regions	Processes are adaptable and responsive to changes in understanding, values, priorities and external pressures. Strategies and approaches used to facilitate change.
P5 Linking scales and activities	Processes support and exhibit connectivity within and between scales
Outcomes criteria	Reflects the outputs or deliverables produced and impacts from regional NRM to date
O1 Improved social capital of planners, managers and participants	Outcomes associated with enhanced individual capabilities, credibility, on-going learning, networks for management and planning and ownership.
O2 Effective and connected institutions	Connectivity between state, regional, sub-regional and local activities; and effective and connected processes and structures at the regional scale.
O3 Improved resource condition	Condition of priority natural, social, cultural and economic resources in regions.

Information gathering

Source 1: Key informant interviews

Fifty-three face-to-face and phone-based interviews were conducted with chairs, executive officers, regional coordinators or planners from regional NRM bodies across Queensland (n=36), and state government agency managerial and operational level staff from the Queensland Departments of Local Government and Planning (DLGP); Natural Resources and Mines (NR&M); Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPIF); and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which are also members of Regional Coordination Groups in Queensland (n=17). These interviews were conducted between September and November 2004. Interviews were based on a structured format in which questions were derived from the specific criteria listed in Table 1. The length of interviews ranged from 1–2.5 hours and were conducted by two interviewers to assist in recording statements as accurately as possible³. These statements were stored in a Microsoft Access database.

Qualitative analysis of the interview data identified both the *diversity* of the perspectives and experiences of the key informants but also areas of strong *agreement or common experience* with regional arrangements. The analysis also considered if differences in perspectives existed between NAPSQ–NHT and NHT-only funded regions or between regional body and respondents from Regional Coordination Groups (RCG). The low number of samples made such comparisons indicative only. Where evident, these differences were reported in the text. A second analysis tool (N-vivo) was applied to a subset of open-ended questions from the interviews to identify themes or issues that potentially cut across individual criteria.

Source 2: Participant observation

In Regional Coordination Groups

Two members of the project team operated as participant–observers from February 2004 to February 2005 within the four RCGs operating in Queensland (currently ongoing). This occurred with the groups' permission. The role of participant/researcher was clarified within a written involvement agreement at the outset and re-negotiated on a six-monthly basis. Four groups currently operate in Queensland, namely North, Central-West, South West and South East. Each of these groups originally included Australian Government members but, at their request, there is no longer Australian Government representation. There were also members from State Government agencies involved in NRM-related business. Each group is also responsible for 'managing' inter-agency and inter-government business relating to natural resource management, the regional NRM bodies and related program delivery within their region. They also provide for regional NRM bodies to participate in those fora. The main role of the RCGs can be generally stated as:

“to foster strong community–government partnerships, coordinate whole of government processes and policies, and resolve policy inconsistencies at the regional level.”⁴

Observations focused on the role and operation of the RCGs as the main structure at the through which government and community planners formally interact on regional NRM delivery in Queensland. Analysis of the RCG observations under the criteria was largely drawn from Central West and Northern RCG forums.

A summary of observations were reported back to Central West and Northern RCG forums at six-monthly intervals and used in their deliberations. Minutes and other documents from those forums were also reviewed and contributed to the analysis. The project team had a similar involvement with the *Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective*, and the *Landcare Council of the Northern Territory* however the data collection process was less formalised or regular. For more details of the approach and findings of this source of information, see Taylor and Walker (2005).⁵

³ Bellamy, J., Taylor, B., McDonald, G. and Smith, T. 2005. Benchmarking Regional Planning Arrangements for NRM in Queensland: Analysis of Key Informant Interviews for 2004.

⁴ Natural Resources and Mines, 2004, www.regionalnrm.qld.gov.au/about/regional/coordination_groups.html

⁵ Taylor, B., and Walker M., 2005. *Regional Coordination Group observations: Changing Government-community Dialogues in Regional NRM Planning*. Internal report Healthy Savanna Planning Systems project, Tropical Savannas Management CRC Project 3.3.5 March.

In regional planning

All members of the research team were involved in various capacities in preparing regional plans (*see Discussion on methods*). This engagement provided first-hand information about the planning process. It also created a potential conflict of interest in evaluating the process. This was minimised by having other researchers conduct interviews in those regions and undertake the analysis of that data.

Source 3: Review of regional plans

Regional plans and investment strategies are the ‘output’ of the initial phase of the regional planning process. Reviewing plans in a systematic way can tell much about the management direction and priorities in regions, information quality and integration, and planning practice. During January and February 2005, nine accredited regional NRM plans were reviewed: Northern Gulf, Southern Gulf, Wet Tropics, Fitzroy, QMDC, Condamine, SEQ, SEQWC, and Desert Channels. An additional four *Regional Coastal Management Plans* were reviewed: Cardwell Hinchinbrook; Wet Tropical Coast; Draft South-east Queensland; and Curtis Coast. This built on an earlier review in 2002-3 of regional NRM plans, existing WRPs and RPAC plans.⁶

The extent to which plans addressed a range of regional assets such as coastal and marine, social and economic or biodiversity outcomes were evaluated through a rational planning framework of major components, including 1) planning context 2) condition and trend information 3) targets and objectives 4) priorities and options 5) implementation and investment tools and 6) monitoring, reporting and evaluation frameworks. Several ‘asset’-based reports were produced that included social and economic; water quality; coasts and marine; biodiversity, soil and pasture health; carbon and energy themes.

A facilitated NRM planners’ workshop was conducted on 9 March 2005. It involved 18 regional body planners from Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia, consultant and other professional planners. The purposes of the workshop were to ground-truth and expand on key findings from the desktop review and to capture and share plan-making experiences between regions and jurisdictions, particularly the use of technical information in developing plans. The main outcomes from that workshop were included in this report—however a separate and more detailed workshop report is being drafted.

Source 4: Policy and program context

The research team reviewed the policy and program setting in all three jurisdictions to better understand the institutional context of the current regional planning arrangements. A chronology of major developments and their implications was compiled. This picture was supplemented with interviews (separate from key informant interviews in Source 1,) with government agency staff engaged in regional liaison roles and by compiling regional biographies. The main milestones within the policy and program development are summarised in *Policy and program setting, trends and practice*, see facing page.

Discussion on methods

Some members of the project team drew on their direct involvement and expertise in regional NRM planning. For example, during 2004–05 some members of the research team operated as advisers, planners and consultants within several regions conducting NRM planning activities. This work was conducted through the TS–CRC in Northern Gulf and the Northern Territory regions, and through the Rainforest CRC in Far North Queensland and Mackay–Whitsunday regions. Other members of the project team were Queensland government employees engaged in regional NRM policy, monitoring and evaluation spheres. While this practical expertise was an asset to the research it has also required careful consideration to manage real, or perceived, conflicts of interest. For example, Queensland government employees were not involved in conducting or analysing interviews with key informants in Queensland’s regional NRM bodies in an effort to ensure that interviewees felt comfortable to provide frank views about the positive and negative aspects of regional NRM in that state.

⁶ McDonald, G. et al 2004 Evaluating Regional Resource Management Plans, Paper prepared for CSIRO/CIRM Symposium on Regional Natural Resource management Planning: the challenges of evaluation as seen through different lenses, Brisbane, 15 October 2004). McDonald et al, 2005 Internal Technical Report: Desktop review of regional NRM plans in Northern Australia; Maher et al 2005 (in progress) NRM Planners Workshop—Trigger Paper and Proceedings: Healthy Planning Systems Project, Tropical Savannas CRC, Wednesday 9 March.

The evaluation framework developed and applied in this project covered all Queensland regions, all of the Northern Territory (as the NT is classified as a single region for the delivery of NHT Extension) and the Kimberly region of north-west Western Australia (see Figure 1). Although most of the information in this report drew from the Queensland experience, some criteria referred to regional planning issues identified in the Territory through work conducted during 2003–4 on a related TS–CRC project. This related project reviewed the NT planning system with a particular focus on regional planning futures. The findings from this work have since been refined and updated with key NT government representatives during the 2004–05⁷. Also garnered were Territory and Kimberley regional NRM planning experiences and these were shared through an NRM planners’ workshop in early 2005 (see Source 3). This workshop also confirmed that many of the issues and challenges identified through the review of regional plans in Queensland were common across the wider tropical savannas study area.

The next phase of the evaluation (2005–06) will expand the benchmarking process into the Northern Territory and Western Australia and will include case-study analysis of key regional planning issues across the savanna region.

Policy and program setting, trends and practice

To better understand the context of the current regional arrangements within the study area, there was an investigation into the history of NRM and related policy and practice in Australia. A chronology of major developments and their significance was documented. This is necessarily brief, given the amount that could be written to cover the numerous events and depth of issues surrounding each of the milestones.

Study of the policy history for NRM, environmental, coastal and marine and general land use planning and management over recent decades revealed a number of key trends. These included:

- A significant evolution of NRM policy over recent decades with the lead coming from Commonwealth Government and being adapted/ taken on board by State and Territory jurisdictions in forms specific to their (perceived) needs.
- A growing importance placed on the regional scale when planning for and managing NRM and planning related issues.
- A marked increase in the level of government legislation and regulation over resource use and environmental management matters introduced since the early 1990s compared with previous decades.
- New initiatives and programs introduced before earlier ones have reached their final implementation and outcomes are fully delivered.
- Structures and policies present in the current system that developed incrementally over past decades and reflect the histories of the agencies and community groups.
- Inconsistent coordination of effort across agencies to address NRM issues despite the increase in legislation and program activities.
- The majority of voluntary NRM initiatives during the past 15 years aimed at promoting landholder and community group action towards sustainability outcomes.
- A measurable decrease in government services to regional and remote areas of Australia over a similar period.
- Changes to government policies relating to telecommunication and privatisation of some community services created additional impacts for these regional and remote communities.
- Recognition by many that the Natural Heritage Trust I (the Trust) had a significant positive impact of building community capacity from the mid-1990s onwards.
- A separation of paths for policy development evident for terrestrial initiatives versus coastal and marine initiatives.

⁷ McDonald, G. and Taylor, B. Planning in the Northern Territory: Summary of key findings and future directions, Discussion paper for the project reference group, TS–CRC, July 2004. and Taylor B and McDonald, G (2004) Notes from Northern Territory agency meetings, October 2004, Darwin

- A separation between NRM/environmental planning and the broader land use planning policy and practice.
- The delay in finalising the Trust Extension Bilateral and implementing the arrangements for this program compared with the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality arrangements resulted in a significant setback for coastal and marine issues in Queensland and how they are integrated or not in accredited regional NRM plans.

Current arrangements

Queensland

At present, 14 community-based regional NRM bodies have been established in Queensland with funding from the NAPSWQ and the first and second NHT programs. These groups represent a central component to the regional NRM arrangements and were built on the previous work of the regional strategy groups established under the first round of NHT funding in the late 1990s.

Northern Territory

Regional planning in the Northern Territory is currently dominated by activities focused on economic and social development under the *Building Stronger Regions, Stronger Futures* policy introduced in late 2003. Specific initiatives have begun in the Katherine, Barkly, East Arnhem, Central Australia and Top End regions. There are also discrete NRM related planning activities in the Douglas–Daly region (integrated land use planning and statutory water allocation planning) and coastal areas (Coastal Management Implementation Plan). The Douglas–Daly region is also a designated priority investment region under the NAPSWQ as is the Ord region straddling the WA and NT border.

The Landcare Council of the Northern Territory is the regional NRM body designated to develop an integrated NRM plan for the Territory (a single region for the purposes of the NHT). A draft plan was endorsed for public consultation during late 2004 and early 2005 and the development of an investment strategy under that plan is nearing completion. The Landcare Council works closely with the NT Government and in particular has operational ties to the NT Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment. Other important regional participants are the Northern and Central Land Councils, which currently manage Indigenous land management and Caring for Country programs. In the management of coastal resources, the National Oceans Office is preparing a Northern Australia plan that includes the Northern Territory and the parts of the north Queensland coast in the project's study area.

Western Australia

The Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group is the body responsible for delivering NRM planning under NHT 2. This region covers approximately 1.85 million square kilometres, which represents 90 per cent of Western Australia. The northern portion, the Kimberley sub-region, lies in the tropical savannas and is part of the evaluation study area. The Interim Kimberley NRM Group is currently developing the sub-regional component of an NRM strategy for the rangelands. Although the region contains a large proportion of the nation's natural assets and contributes significantly to the national economy, it has traditionally been allocated limited resources and has a relatively low population to address and manage natural resources issues. The region comprises mainly of pastoral and mining interests and to a lesser extent cropping interests. Pastoral leases cover 98 million hectares of the Rangeland region, stretching from the Kimberley in the north to the Great Australian Bight in the south. It also contains many areas of special significance to Aboriginal communities.

Progress and constraints in regions 2004–05

A note on reporting against the criteria

Use of regional examples

Specific regional examples were presented where they were useful in demonstrating a general ‘trend’ or ‘experience’. Specific examples were also used to demonstrate experience of individual regions or cases that differentiate between regions. Again, the vast majority of information reported under the following criteria headings refers to data collected through the Queensland regions unless otherwise noted.

Terminology

As the information presented against each criteria is a synthesis of information from several sources (i.e. interviews, plan reviews and observations) different terms used in the text point to the main source of that information. These terms are outlined in Box 3.

Timing of the evaluation

It is important to note that the findings presented here reflected the period of time between late 2003 and early 2005 that can be considered as the ‘start-up’ or planning phase for most regional NRM organisations, under the current NHT and NAPSWQ programs. This was also the period for policy implementation and testing, and contribution to planning and assessment phases for state and territory government agencies.

It would be inaccurate and misleading to evaluate progress in regions without recognising the influence of pre-existing regional, catchment and local scale activities, which varied markedly between regions (this is discussed under several criteria). As such arrangements in NRM regions started at different stages and progressed at very different rates—in part due to earlier progress under the initial phase of NHT, and the identification of regions for priority investment under the NAPSWQ or association with other national initiatives such as the Murray Darling Basin Commission. These factors need to be considered in reading the findings of this evaluation, particularly in relation to outcomes criteria.

In Queensland, at the mid-point of the information gathering period (October–November, 2004), eight of the 14 regional bodies had fully met their designation criteria with negotiations underway with the remaining groups to address outstanding issues. Four regional plans had been recommended for accreditation; an additional three plans had been drafted and released for public comment; a further eight regional bodies have plans either in public release or close to it; and two regional investment strategies have been approved, with several in draft form or being prepared.

At the time this report was initiated (March–April 2005) 11 of the regional NRM plans had been accredited or recommended for accreditation, an additional three plans were in final stages; and some nine Regional Investment Strategies had been approved with several more in the final stages of development.

Box 3: Terms used in reporting against the criteria

Respondents or interviewees refers to regional NRM body or RCG members who took part in the interviews (see Information gathering, Source 1)

Observed refers to researcher observations made from participating in RCG (see Information gathering: Source 2)

Plan reviews or evident in plans refers to information gathered through a desktop review of nine accredited regional NRM plans in February 2005 (see Information gathering: Source 3)

C1 Thinking regionally

'Regional stakeholders have a clear identification with the NRM region, an acceptance of its NRM issues and are generally thinking regionally.'

Stakeholders focus on or identify with sectors, catchments or local areas

Past community-based NRM approaches primarily focused on catchment or local scales. With the large geographical size of most current NRM regions covering diverse landscapes and communities, stakeholder identification with the region as an entity is proving challenging and, overall, regional identification is not perceived to be strong among the broader community. Rather than thinking of NRM 'regionally', people commonly tend to be focused locally, associating more strongly with parts of an NRM region particularly for social and business reasons, for example, with catchment or local government areas or a major land use (also see *C3 Understanding NRM*). Where a parochial or self-interested focus is strong for specific sector groups (such as particular rural industries, catchment management or Landcare stakeholders, or with local governments) it is seen to be inhibiting the regional NRM process in some regions. Interview respondents report that conservation and Indigenous interests find participating in, and hence identifying with NRM regions challenging (see *S4 Participation and engagement structures*, and, *P2 Capacity to participate*).

The common perception of interview respondents was that people identified well with NRM issues that directly impact on either themselves, or more broadly their industry or sector, and with issues that relate well with regional NRM boundaries. Such issues included weeds and other pests, water allocation and vegetation management. However other issues, which do not fall into these categories, were often perceived as hard to get "recognition of" in the broader community. These included salinity, biodiversity and water quality. In addition, in regions with large peri-urban areas or major towns, rural stakeholders commonly perceived urban stakeholders as having a poor understanding and connection with rural NRM issues.

Advantage of prior 'regional' experiences with local governments

Overall, local governments varied greatly in their identification with both the NRM regions and their NRM issues. Where identification was strong there was commonly a history of prior involvement with regional planning or cooperation on NRM-related issues through Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs).

C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment

'Regional stakeholders recognise, practice, and are supportive of participation and collaboration that generates willingness for learning and change. Political commitment is present among key regional stakeholders.'

Positive past experiences, incentives and strong regional pressures enhance a collaborative culture

Respondents perceived a regional culture that supported interaction of stakeholders and between institutions existed in regions where there was:

- A **positive prior history** of collaborative regional processes (e.g. regional planning, Indigenous co-management, catchment management) including an understanding of the need for due process.
- Sufficient incentives and/or a perception of **economic or other benefit** to particular stakeholders (e.g. industry groups, local government).
- Strong community recognition that changes cannot occur without broad **community involvement** in policy processes, or
- Strong social, economic and environmental **pressures** present and stakeholder ownership of those problems.

Lack of trust, poor understanding and self-interest hinder regional collaboration

On the other hand, a regional stakeholder culture that impeded current regional NRM planning processes was perceived to be present where:

- A **lack of trust in due process** existed as a result of either confusion over multiple planning initiatives or unfavourable legacies of previous regional NRM initiatives and current political reform (relating especially to water and vegetation management processes).
- **Poor understanding of current NRM arrangements**, including perceptions of who was driving the process (i.e. government or communities or a partnership); or
- **Existence of stakeholder self-interest and 'turf protection'** due to: (i) a perception of lack of value in collaboration; (ii) being forced to collaborate (e.g. some government agencies); (iii) perceived loss of past funding sources (e.g. ICM and Landcare groups and EPA's World Heritage programs); or (iv) existence of better opportunities for funding through other parallel programs.

New regional NRM arrangements are fostering a collaborative culture

Notwithstanding these issues, there was evidence of a changing culture among some stakeholders towards improved collaboration and participation in the new regional NRM arrangements. For example, positive broader community experiences were reported with the current regional NRM planning process. In particular, the engagement approaches for the regional NRM plan development in some regions fostered extensive open debate on issues and exchange of information among many regional stakeholders. Importantly, a focus in engagement processes on 'how to improve land management systems' rather than on 'who the regional body is' appeared most important.

Positive shift emerging in the collaborative culture of local governments

A common view of interview respondents was that initially local government considered itself the only true representative of the broader community. Consequently its involvement was reduced by concerns that its mandate was under threat by new regional arrangements. However, a gradual positive shift in the culture of local government, in respect to collaboration with NRM processes, began to emerge in many regions, as local government gained experience with the new arrangements and regional bodies themselves matured.

Variable shift in the culture of state agencies to collaboration and interaction with regional NRM bodies

Over time there was evidence of an 'opening up' of RCG forums with improved access of and support to regional bodies from state agency operational staff in some regions. This shift in the culture of state agencies to collaboration with regional NRM bodies was variable across agencies and was taking longer in some regions than others, generating considerable tensions in the process of regional governance. Early in the process (particularly in north Queensland), both regional body and regional

agency staff reported that “key agencies cannot currently play well together” and had “difficulty in finding common ground between broad policy agenda”. However by late 2004, overall a positive ‘shift in attitudes’ was being noted by regional bodies, although this was variable across agencies (see also *S2 Aligned institutions*).

Generation of a collaborative culture was dependent on the initiative of regional bodies

In terms of promoting a culture of collaboration among regional stakeholders, this culture was largely generated from the initiative and perseverance of regional NRM bodies themselves as they matured over time and gained confidence as NRM brokers.

Based on the experience of regional body members in Queensland with the new regional arrangements, political commitment to long-term NRM varied markedly both within and between the different tiers of government as well as between industry groups and among politicians.

Perceptions of political commitment in local government

The majority of regional bodies identified at least some level of political commitment to long-term regional NRM from local government. However, this also varied within a region depending either on the prevailing issues or on the particular situation of different shires within the region (see Box 4). This variability related to some regions having had active local government involvement built on past positive experiences with ROCs and Regional Planning Advisory Committees (RPACs) or with current or prior regional NRM processes (see also *S2 Aligned Institutions*).

In some cases, local government was reluctantly engaging with regional NRM as they recognised the impacts of increased demands on regional resources (e.g. water demand and its impact on social systems in the Queensland Murray Darling Basin regions). Some local governments were seen to be “fence-sitting” or taking a “wait-and-see” attitude, considered by respondents to be due to a lack of resources and funding. There were also perceptions of regional NRM as a threat to local government in the form of concerns over cost-shifting, or the emergence of an additional fourth tier of government.

Perceptions of political commitment in state government

In comparison with local and federal government, the majority of regional bodies perceived state government as having the lowest overall level of political commitment in their region to long-term regional NRM (see Box 4). A key issue raised was the lack of a whole-of-state government approach to NRM. Within regional bodies, there were clear perceptions that some state agencies were not willing partners and considered regional NRM arrangements as ‘a social experiment’ only and not a long-term change to the way business was done. EPA was often singled out in this respect in terms of their lack of commitment to regional arrangements in the longer term. Moreover there was a perception among regional bodies as well as members of RCGs that there was a poor understanding and a lack of shared priorities for NRM for the State Government. Additionally, there was a perception that the full process for the new regional arrangements had not really been thought through (e.g. the high-order expectations of state agencies were not realistic and their requirements of regional bodies for plan development was “very much on the run”).

Other factors demonstrating limited political commitment by State Government and which were considered to undermine regional NRM arrangements related to:

- Tensions in relationships between the state and federal governments.
- Lack of an explicit commitment in the state budget to community-based regional NRM.

Box4: Political commitment, local and state

Notions of political commitment in local government to long-term regional NRM related to:

- Willingness to be involved actively in the regional NRM body.
- Taking a leadership role in new regional NRM arrangements, and
- Providing support for NRM in practice (e.g. through pest management planning or on-ground activities and employing environmental officers).

Notions of political commitment in state government to long-term regional NRM related to:

- Commitment to the bilateral agreement with the Federal Government.
- Positive working relationships with the regional NRM bodies.
- Allocation of resources to regional NRM planning.
- Commitment beyond supporting community engagement alone.
- Commitment to the continuation of funding beyond the initial seven to eight years NAPSWQ and NHT funding.
- Presence of a shared sense of purpose and priorities for NRM across and within agencies.
- Agencies’ willingness to share their investment in knowledge, and
- Level of bureaucratic requirements imposed on regional bodies (e.g. accountability or performance reporting).

- Poor cash contributions from state agencies under the NHT and poor in-kind contributions under NAPSQ, and
- Reluctance by agencies to share their investment in knowledge.

Australian / Federal government commitment

The majority of regional bodies identified the Australian government as having the highest overall level of political commitment in their region to long-term regional NRM in comparison with local and state government (see Box 5). While federal–state government tensions were an issue challenging the partnership approach, federal government was often seen by regional bodies to be more consistent in their commitment and support for regional delivery than is state government. However, some regional bodies also expressed concerns that federal government was not necessarily supportive of the current Queensland model of regional arrangements.

Similar to the case for state government, the fragmented bureaucratic approach of federal government overall to regional NRM was seen as inhibiting the regional NRM delivery in practice. This was demonstrated by the Australian Government’s continued commitment to a multiple program-based funding approach (and not necessarily a regionally coordinated approach for NRM).

Moreover, although displaying a keen willingness to ‘walk down the track’ and drive the regional NRM initiative, uncertainty existed, particularly in regional bodies, concerning whether the Australian Government would step away from the process beyond the current program life. Further concerns about this related to the limitations imposed on regional NRM by federal funding focusing only on on-ground works undertaken by or through regional bodies, but not on contributing to regional body organisational costs.

Political commitment of industry bodies

Political commitment to long-term regional NRM from industry bodies varied depending on the particular industry and the prevailing issues within the region (see Box 5). At the peak industry group level, commonly there was knowledge and acceptance that the future of rural industries was intrinsically linked to sustainable NRM. Regional bodies believed that concerns from industry groups over increased NRM regulation inhibited partnerships—particularly with pastoral industry groups. General concerns over increased NRM regulation, was believed by regional bodies to have inhibited partnerships with pastoral peak industry groups in particular.

At the regional and local levels, industry commitment to regional NRM was often more about recognising industry had to take ownership of NRM issues, or “someone else will do it for them”—rather than being driven by any substantive realisation of the impacts of those issues. However, even though industry commitment may be ‘forced’ due to legislation (e.g. the fishing industry), some industry groups were actively investing in environmental management systems (EMS) and farm management systems (FMS) as well as other voluntary standards and best management practices (e.g. the cotton industry). The motivation for this investment could relate to industry stakeholders realising they would not stand up to public scrutiny unless they made an effort to show their commitment to sustainability. It may also be more locally driven by the recognition of the need for long-term sustainability of farm businesses. Notwithstanding, there was a common perception that at the regional level industry stakeholders would only stay committed to long-term regional NRM if they could see on-ground outcomes and, in particular, something in it for themselves.

Box 5: Australian Government commitment

Stakeholder notions of political commitment in Australian government to long-term regional NRM related to:

- Establishment of a bilateral agreement with state government.
- Funding for regional NRM delivery needs a federal budget item.
- Willingness to ‘walk down the track’ (e.g. a seven-year program to support the regional delivery process).
- Level of focus on a ‘regionally coordinated’ approach (versus a multiple program-based funding approach).
- The level of bureaucratic requirements (e.g. accountability/performance reporting), and
- Demonstration of bipartisan support for regional NRM.

Box 6: Industry group Commitment

Stakeholder notions of political commitment in industry groups to long-term regional NRM related to:

- Peak body attitudes and linkages with regional processes and arrangements.
- Direct involvement in regional NRM bodies.
- Commitment to sustainable NRM through production related investment for sustainable futures.
- Presence of legislative requirements/ incentives.

Other factors influencing industry commitment to NRM in the regional planning processes related to the capacity for involvement at the regional level and included:

- The recent inception of the current regional arrangements—meaning that it was still too early in the process to expect broad industry commitment (e.g. Torres Strait, Cape York).
- Some industry groups have low membership and low capacity as organisations to get involved at the regional scale directly, and
- Industry traditionally had access to funding that was ‘outside’ of the regional process.

Overall across the NRM regions in Queensland, the level of commitment to long-term regional NRM by **politicians** varied with the particular individual politician and with the political level (i.e. federal, state and local) in any one region. Political commitment by politicians (see Box 7) was also influenced by ‘political will’. For example “sitting on the fence” depended on the stage in the political cycle and an inability to commit beyond the three-year political cycle.

Although there was nothing explicitly identified to indicate that politicians were not committed—especially to ‘the bigger picture’—some regions noted they “have not received any political opposition or resistance but likewise neither input”. Most of the regional NRM planning was being pushed more by bureaucrats with many politicians identified as lacking an understanding of NRM and what the regional NRM process was about.

Box 7: Politicians’ commitment

Stakeholder notions of political commitment by politicians to long term regional NRM related to:

- Attending relevant meetings and providing support for NRM agenda.
- Degree they were able to be consulted on NRM issues.
- Involvement of local government councillors in regional bodies.
- Supporting program allocations for projects.
- Media attention given to regional NRM by politicians.
- Not openly opposing the NRM agenda.

C3 Understanding NRM

'The recognition by regional stakeholders of the 'multi-dimensional nature' of NRM, ie. social, economic, environmental and institutional/political dimensions.'

Although invoking much passion in the community and within regional bodies, the concept of the multi-dimensional nature of NRM was commonly recognised as poorly understood at a regional or systemic level by most stakeholders. Stakeholders often recognised NRM was complex and that the task was difficult and enormous, but in practice they tended to break NRM down to its component parts (either the triple/quadruple bottom line dimensions or geographically) and dealt with things as single issues or from a purely sectoral view rather than thinking systemically. In particular, although regional stakeholders had a fairly generic understanding of the issues and their impacts at an individual or local industry/enterprise level, they often had a poor understanding of processes and impacts when issues were scaled up to a regional level (see also *C1 Thinking regionally and S6 Monitoring return on investment*). Perceptions were that community measures of success were also often focused on immediate practical benefits versus a more systemic triple or quadruple bottom line view.

Unfavourable institutional environment for engaging landholders

However, an unfavourable institutional environment hampered regional bodies and the engagement of the broader community in NRM. During 2004, regional bodies increasingly raised concerns about the volume and complexity of state and national NRM policy and compliance activities. While recognising the challenge of engaging landholders, and emphasising the importance of change to on-ground practice, government policies and strategies at state and federal level were considered by regional bodies to impede their ability to engage individual landholders successfully. Regional bodies also recognised the awareness raising benefits for industry of increasing government pressure for NRM compliance. were also acutely aware of the positive and negative impacts of complying with multiple regulations, and emerging policy tools on industry sectors and their implications for better understanding NRM problems.

Conflicting state interests in regional development agenda

Regional bodies also raised concerns over the impacts of conflicting state interests in regional development agendas (e.g. government support for intensive agriculture or new mining ventures). They identified a need for future development agenda to be discussed in terms of competing interests, and the need to recognise the complex nature of these trade-offs at the regional scale.

Critical issues emerging were:

- Economic pressures often dominated views on NRM.
- Understanding of NRM at a more systemic level was focused locally rather than regionally.
- Despite much passion expressed about the social impacts and implications in NRM, social dimension were often left "off the agenda" in regional NRM planning (see also *P3 Procedural fairness*).
- Although there often was an understanding of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of NRM, the institutional dimension was poorly understood.

Notwithstanding, there was also a feeling that a better understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of NRM among regional stakeholders was starting to emerge. Importantly, more recent experiences with previous NRM and regional planning initiatives (e.g. Regional NRM groups under the first phase of the NHT and regional planning associated with the Integrated Planning Act) built capacity in this area.

C4 Recognising regional diversity and complexity

'The diversity and complexity of the social, economic, ecological and institutional characteristics of the region are recognised and widely understood.'

The NRM regions in Queensland are highly diverse and vary in terms of their social, economic, institutional, environmental and physical complexity. These diverse regional characteristics can both hinder and enhance a regional NRM approach depending on the situation. Key considerations were:

- Level of organisational development and prior experience of the regional NRM planning groups.
- Influence of regional geography.
- Diversity and complexity of the political landscape.
- Influences of industry and agency operational contexts.

Legacy of prior experience with regional NRM provides a platform for building new NRM arrangements

Prior experience with NRM and regional planning in a region often provided a good platform for regional NRM planning arrangements to build on and a basis for regional stakeholders having an integrated approach to NRM issues. Specifically in some regions it has meant a:

- Legacy of a well-networked regional community.
- Track record of community consultation and regional decision-making.
- Quantum of regional data and information collected.
- Degree of maturity in regional arrangements and a willingness of regional bodies to operate as business entities and link with other regional initiatives.

In contrast, other regions saw advantages in not having a solid past history of regional arrangements as they were starting effectively with 'a clean slate'.

Notwithstanding the advantages of prior experience with NRM, a past history also presented for some regions a significant challenge in terms of the numbers of organisations mobilised for NRM and complex political landscapes—particularly in regions of rapid population growth and land-use change (e.g. NRMSEQ, Wet Tropics, SEQ Western Catchments). These challenges for the new regional NRM arrangements were compounded by a high level of demarcation in roles in regulation, monitoring, planning and policy development in these regions. In addition, too many regional NRM organisations at work may lead to competitiveness between groups and costly institutional infrastructure.

Several regional bodies experienced challenges in moving from old (existing) to new regional NRM planning arrangements. In regions such as Desert Channels this involved considerable investment in managing the 'hangover' from previous ICM and Lake Eyre Basin arrangements and bringing forward the best aspects while mitigating negative community perceptions of the previous system. Other regions reported having to juggle negotiations on mergers between regions or organisations in the midst of conducting their own planning activities—as well as establishing an identity with their regional community, and clarifying their own roles and responsibilities (e.g. SEQ Western Catchments and NRMSEQ).

Impacts of regional size and population on success

Geographical location, size and population density impacted differently on regional NRM arrangements. For regions with large areas but relatively small and dispersed populations, the regional approach was hindered by high business transaction costs, distance and communication infrastructure limitations on community and landholder engagement. For some rural regions remoteness is commonly a major challenge (e.g. South West NRM, Desert Channels, Southern Gulf and Northern Gulf) due to, for example:

- Difficulties in attracting and retaining staff based outside major urban centres.
- Regions with a strong seasonal climate and related access difficulties pose challenges to inclusive engagement processes.

- Negative impacts on their capacity to access agency staff, increasingly located in major centres (see also *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*)

There were however, cases where having a lower total regional population provided an opportunity for NRM bodies in those regions to undertake a more inclusive engagement process (see *PI Processes for integrating knowledge and values*)

In addition, **population change** whether increasing or decreasing could have contrasting impacts on regional NRM arrangements. For example, for a number of rural regions with a declining and an ageing population, low cultural diversity and/or high levels of poverty (South West, Desert Channels, Southern Gulf) often translated into little support to embrace change. In contrast, regions with a high rate of population increase had similar challenges. For example, increasing populations of young people and retirees, who may not have a real interest in, or understanding of, the region, created a context in which the “population’s value systems are not in line with NRM” (e.g. SEQ Western Catchments). For regions that were growing and expanding, a large number of new people coming into the region could also result in new ideas and innovative approaches to NRM (e.g. NRMSEQ and SEQ Western Catchments).

Regions with **highly diverse environments or land uses** often had greater difficulty in prioritising NRM issues or actions. A regional ‘focus’ was created in regions such as the Wet Tropics due to the high biodiversity values, however the iconic nature of the region based on this unique asset means some of the issues are often seen as too difficult to tackle.

Characteristics of **regional industries** that had positive influences or enhanced the regional NRM approach, were identified as:

- Some large grazing operations led implementation of more sustainable management practices in those industries.
- Dominance of one major base industry (e.g. sugar, cattle grazing) made consensus easier in some regions.
- Tourism drove awareness of biodiversity issues within the region and its economic value (see also *S4 Participation and engagement structures*).
- The mining industry has the ability to spend money and help deliver outcomes and in addition many mining companies ‘already have social justice as part of their agenda’.
- The fisheries industry had working parties established for many years in some regions which have been used in the current NRM planning process.

The **complexity of the political landscape** in some regions affected the formation of NRM arrangements in those regions. Examples of this complexity included engaging Indigenous communities where many different traditional owner and other Indigenous interests existed, often in conflict; and, doing NRM business in regions such as the Torres Strait where international boundaries and related international conventions and rights made things “very complicated”.

Managing complexity within and between agencies and between regions

Possibly one of the biggest challenges for **state agencies** was managing the internal complexity within and between agencies and between regions (e.g. SEQ with six different regional managers’ forums). Different state agencies with NRM responsibilities drove policy and planning at a range of different timeframes and boundaries within a region. This situation was also exacerbated by NRM regional bodies starting at different stages and progressing at very different rates. The northern part of the state defined by the NR&M regional service delivery boundary, contains six NRM regions ranging from those with a high public profile (e.g. Wet Tropics), to the more remote and somewhat institutionally isolated (e.g. Northern Gulf and Southern Gulf), to those with international border and Indigenous governance considerations (e.g. Torres Strait).

S1 Coherent policy and governance structures

'The degree to which policy, program, governance (and legislative) structures agree in intent, are consistent and logically connected.'

Clear objectives and consistent implementation of policy and legislative instruments helped regional NRM bodies and other sub-regional groups and stakeholders implement NRM strategically. Key factors for consideration in relation to these issues included clarity in decision making rights or powers, existence of a clear mandate (see also *S3 Roles and responsibilities*); funding structures (see also *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*), and access to required skills (see *S7 Structures for knowledge integration*).

A key issue with the regional NRM arrangements raised by a number of informants was the lack of clarity and consistency of the goals of the new regional model and its related implementation arrangements. One regional body member likened the current regional process to "eyeing a buck-jumping horse", while others remarked that "government needs to stop shifting the goal posts" and "stick to decisions". Others raised the issue that in practice there was a lack of clarity of, or agreement on, roles of regional bodies and responsibilities of their stakeholders, while a proliferation of procedural obligations largely relating to corporate governance conditions often "frustrate strategic thinking and implementation".

Regional body mandate to implement NRM strategically

Notwithstanding, more than two-thirds of respondents (both government and regional bodies) considered regional NRM bodies had a **mandate** to implement NRM in a strategic way. This was related to several factors including:

- A growing stakeholder recognition of regional NRM bodies as legitimate entities and having a legitimate role in regional NRM planning and delivery.
- Formal endorsement and funding provided by both State and Australian governments (e.g. through the Joint Steering Committee (JSC)).
- State government starting in some instances to look to deliver its policies and realise its objectives through regional NRM plans (e.g. regional bodies saying 'our plan is becoming their plan').
- State governments realising the potential of NRM plans delivering on their objectives.
- The mandate given to members of some regional boards through election by their sectors as representatives on the board.

Other factors identified that were seen to **limit the mandate** of regional bodies included ministerial appointments of NRM board members (non-elected) under some regional body models; non-statutory status of regional bodies; and the perception by many that both federal and state government "are not fully committed to the approach" and, in particular, they had "not yet let go of the strings". Moreover competition for community involvement from other parallel regional planning initiatives created conflict in regional communities.

Funding structures were widely criticised by both state agency members and regional body participants as undermining the regional NRM approach. These criticisms consistently focused on the high transaction costs incurred in the preparation and reporting against applications, poor continuity, and the largely non-strategic nature and timing of funding rounds. Multiple and parallel funding initiatives by both state and federal government agencies created confusion and sometimes conflict within regions, particularly where funding administrators had poor knowledge of regional arrangements. For some regions, the availability of alternative funding avenues for industry and local government was a disincentive for their engagement in regional NRM.

Continuity of funding became a critical issue during 2004 with several regional bodies reporting that poor continuity created difficulties in maintaining staff, momentum of processes and engagement activities and in some cases risked insolvency due to delays in receiving funds. There were also concerns expressed by regional body members on their ability to negotiate funding contracts with governments for a fair outcome.

Several regional bodies also stated difficulties in being in a position to spend their funding effectively due to **staff and skill limitations** (see also *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*). Attracting and maintaining quality staff in regional and remote areas in a climate of uncertain funding and political

commitment was seen as a major inconsistency between the task at hand and policy environments. The lack of specialist environmental officers in local governments was also widely noted as another gap in the regional skill pool.

NRM program scope limits Indigenous aspirations and 'integrated' approaches

Regional bodies recognised the need to provide or support Indigenous NRM aspirations through employment opportunities linked to custodial, resource and cultural management and economic aspirations. Respondents however saw that the current scope of NRM funding programs limited such approaches.

There were also considerable inconsistencies evident between program and integrated planning in practice. Despite a strong push by governments for regions to develop an 'integrated' regional plan, regional bodies were regularly advised to "be careful" of seeking funding through NAPSWQ and NHT programs for 'non-core' NRM issues (e.g. Indigenous cultural heritage, rural industry viability).

The review of regional NRM plans found that most plans were very conscious of the main NRM-related programs, making quite explicit the plan's intent to meet **program funding and accreditation requirements**. Regional NRM plans also demonstrated a working knowledge of other major plans, policies and legislation that impacted or informed their activities in some way.

Program 'silos' makes prioritising program objectives difficult

Regional NRM planners interviewed had different perceptions on the value of advice provided by officers of the many and varied government programs. A common perception, even where highly valued, was that advice provided in **programmatic 'silos'** made prioritising those program objectives difficult, as was communicating the multiple objectives of those programs to the public.

S2 Aligned institutions

'Institutions have a high degree of integration and adaptiveness to support regional priorities.'

Rather than 'integration' of regional plans and planning processes, interview respondents commonly identified critical success factors for regional NRM arrangements as including better "**cooperation**" and "**coordination and alignment of planning**" across all tiers of government as well as other critical players such as industry. However, regional experiences were highly divided on whether or not government at all tiers is aligning its activities to support regional priorities and actions.

Local government

Linkages between regional NRM planning and local government were reported to be highly variable across regions. A common view however was that although local governments were starting to think about alignment of their activities with regional priorities and actions, it was 'still too early' in the regional NRM process (see also *C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment*). Where some direct alignment of activities with NRM planning was occurring, it was largely due to a **history of regional cooperation** (e.g. through pre-existing relationships with ROCs).

Local government alignment is occurring where regional NRM priorities link with their roles under statutes

In particular, the strongest alignment reported was where local government priorities were linked to its roles and **responsibilities under statutes** (e.g. pests and weed management and stock routes). Many local governments commonly used regional NRM plans to support their own funding applications. Others saw the regional process as a funding source for achieving their more regionally focused NRM objectives (e.g. funding local government NRM coordinators for networking between councils). Moreover, some local governments were actively involved through membership on regional NRM boards, participating in setting priorities in regional NRM plans and multi-shire cooperative processes for issue such as pest management planning (see also *P5 Linking scales and actives*). In regions where relationships between local government and regional NRM bodies were particularly strong (such as SEQ Western Catchments and NRMSEQ), local government was seen as a major driver of regional arrangements.

Impediments to alignment of local government activities with regional NRM planning included:

- Financial constraints associated with a low rate base of some shires.
- Competition from other planning activities (such as regional planning under the *Integrated Planning Act*, and regional waste or pest planning) which usually were a higher priority for local governments.
- A fear that either the state government or the regional bodies themselves would devolve responsibilities for NRM to local government without the appropriate concomitant resources for local government to undertake them.

State government

A common perception was that the process of state government aligning its activities to support regional priorities and actions was "slow and painful" and that it was "challenging agency cultures". Although some agencies were further along the track than two or three years ago towards alignment, it was perceived by some regions that it was still too early in the current regional NRM planning process for significant alignment of agency activities.

In this context, agency alignment (or intent to align) was seen to vary *within* agencies and *between* agencies across regions. Among the agencies, NR&M was seen to be generally consistent in this respect, as was DPI&F (although viewed as a late starter in some regions). The intent of agencies such as DLGPSR was generally less clear, and EPA—although making significant technical contributions to plans—appeared unwilling to consider even *potential* management or implementation partnerships with regional bodies.

Some regions reported however, that state government was trying, at least 'on paper', to get regional NRM planning activities and priorities to align with state agency priorities or work plans rather than vice versa. Specifically, one of the major constraints regularly identified was poor disclosure or ability of agencies to articulate **budgets and forward priorities** within regions.

Regional bodies identify that this required improved transparency and communication of state agencies. However northern and central RCG members noted the main difficulty was getting coordination within and between agencies. A common belief was that to effectively resource the coordination of government efforts across agencies (including continuity of staff, data provision, and linking operational planning with regional body activity) a **long-term vision** or **commitment to regional NRM** was required from governments.

Some of the main **drivers for aligning priorities** was seen as the formal financial ‘partnership’ agreements between regional bodies and governments; program requirements to match funding; and, signed commitments under the bilateral agreement for data sharing. Regional state government agency staff also reported that the development of NRM plans themselves was providing a practical or tangible **focus for exploring common agency priorities** and a useful structure for cross-government response to initiatives such as the Reef Plan.

Developing NRM plans has provided a practical ‘focus for exploring common agency priorities’

Importantly, informants recognised and provided **examples of significant progress on alignment** between state government agencies and regional body activity, reducing duplication of regional investment and building on each other’s work. These emerging partnerships are discussed in detail in *P5 Linking scales and activities* and *S7 Structures for integrating knowledge*.

‘Core’ NRM agencies on RCGs (in north and central regions) expressed ongoing concerns about difficulties in keeping agencies such as DSD&I and DLGPSR at the table. In part this is perceived to result from ‘program capture’ of the RCGs effectively marginalising these agencies from what were, prior to NAPSWQ, broader-based forums for progressing regional cooperation on NRM issues.

RCG and regional body respondents viewed Australian government involvement in the RCG forums as largely ‘desirable’ for mitigating negative effects of mixed messages to regional groups. However in mid 2004 Australian government officers withdrew from these forums.

Australian Government

While recognising that the Australian Government is putting up considerable funding to support regional NRM planning, a common perception was that the Australian Government is focused on investing in its own priorities as an external investor and not as an on-ground player. In this context, the role of Australian Government regional and state-wide facilitators was often seen by regional bodies and state agencies as lobbying for commonwealth government agenda in regional plans. Any alignment that was occurring was seen to occur largely through the JSC, where the Australian Government agencies bring their own priorities to the table. Respondents believed conflicting or differing priorities between governments contributed in part to ‘mixed messages’ to regional bodies. Factors inhibiting alignment between regions and the Australian Government agencies included:

- Differences in the perceived value of outcomes such as capacity building;
- Setting unrealistic timeframes for regional bodies to work with, which was compounded by a high turn-over of staff the regional bodies deal within federal government.
- The complexity and disaggregating effects of responding to parallel funding initiatives (see *S1 Coherent policy and governance structures*).

S3 Roles and responsibilities

'Roles and responsibilities in regional NRM arrangements are clearly defined and understood.'

Generally good awareness of roles and responsibilities exists

A majority of regional body interviewees perceived that stakeholders in the regions were aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to NRM, or that the awareness of at least some stakeholder groups was improving. Many emphasise that this awareness did not always equate "to doing something about those responsibilities in practice". There was a general view that greater compliance requirements (e.g. relating to vegetation or water management) and efforts by industry to meet duty of care (e.g. the cotton industry and BMPs) were driving awareness of roles and responsibilities particularly at the property scale. Interviewees also indicated they were seeing greater expression of cultural and natural resource rights and responsibilities by Traditional Owners (e.g. dugong and turtle management issues).

The process of designing regional investments and the implementation process itself will further clarify roles

Regional NRM planning activities under NAPSWQ and the NHT were seen by regional body and state agency members to have improved their understanding of roles and responsibilities for NRM in regions. Both groups also expected that finishing and implementing the regional investment strategies would further clarify these. For example, one respondent noted:

"...the nitty-gritty of negotiating priorities and targets has crystallised people's responsibilities, at least at the philosophical level of cost-sharing..."

Factors inhibiting awareness of roles, or the capability to act on responsibilities, included:

- Limited resourcing capacity for smaller or remote local governments to meet their roles and responsibilities (see Box 8).
- Limited capacity of state government agencies to act on their roles and responsibilities outside the major urban centres due to their limited presence on the ground.
- Both in practice and in perception, the 'shedding' of roles and responsibilities from one layer of government to the next, especially devolution to local governments and from government to community.
- Jurisdictional and legislative complexity, causing tensions and confusion between agencies and levels of government as to who does what. For example, local governments' role in relation to vegetation clearing and riparian management. One respondent noted: "the more legislation and planning that goes out into regions the greater the confusion".
- Differing perceptions on public and private benefit a major issue for acceptance of roles and responsibilities.
- At landholder scale, meeting stewardship responsibilities often perceived as cost-prohibitive.

Box 8: Local government

"Many local governments lack the funds, infrastructure and other resources to meet their roles and responsibilities (e.g. management of weeds and pests on road reserves) and are very wary of what the devolution of roles and responsibilities for NRM will entail for them".

Role of Regional Coordination Groups

Observations supported views of respondents that RCGs formed an important (and vital) part of the 'coordination infrastructure' in regions. State agencies indicated they were "**getting used to**" their **new roles** and new relationship with community-based regional bodies, despite being ill-equipped or resourced for this role. The role of RCGs generated significant tension in the first half of 2004. This was due to RCGs playing both a 'regional partnership' function, and an 'advisory' or default assessor role for NRM plans and investment proposals, which negatively affected working relationships between government and regional bodies. RCGs seem to have resolved this to a large extent through the **separation in advice and partnering roles** between regional managers and operational and community partnerships staff in regions. There were also some differences of views among state agencies participating on the RCGs observed during 2004 on whose role it is to **resolve conflict between agency policies or priorities**.

Stakeholder contributions to regional monitoring systems was unclear

Future roles of RCGs were also debated during 2004–05 (see *P4 Adaptive and responsive processes*). For example, a discussion in late 2004 within the Central West RCG on strategic priorities for 2005 led to agencies agreeing to focus on accreditation of remaining plans, regional body and state agency implementation links, and managing emerging issues such as the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan and the State Government's Options paper on future regional arrangements. Regional bodies, in response, raised other strategic focus areas for the RCG including driving the links to local government and planning schemes; supporting improved coordination of regional resource condition monitoring; and responding to new policy drivers such as the expanded land reform agenda. One of these areas in particular—roles, responsibilities and contributions of government, community and industry to regional monitoring systems—seemed still largely undefined or unclear at best. This was particularly evident in regional NRM plans where there was a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities for monitoring indicators in surface, groundwater and receiving waters.

Diverse roles of regional NRM bodies

What is emerging in practice is the diversity of roles that Regional NRM bodies are playing across regions and are perceived to play by the bodies themselves and regional agency members. Some of these roles include (and are not mutually exclusive) (see also *S7 Structures for integrating knowledge*):

- Developers of the regional NRM plan and investment strategy.
- Facilitators of plan development and implementation (not the actual planners or implementers as such).
- Supporting and driving better integration and coordination of regional planning, including across shires and bio-regions.
- Providing a 'point of focus' for NRM in the region, bringing people together, mediating conflicting views and aspirations (see also *P4 Adaptive and responsive processes*).
- Providing information on and 'interpreting' government policies, regulations and planning activities for landholders and stakeholders (e.g. property management planning requirements).
- Supporting landholders to develop property management plans.
- Helping to align regional investment and providing a source of funding for NRM implementation.
- A lobbying group (e.g. of government on the region's behalf, or of community on government's behalf).

It was commonly considered that among the broader community and stakeholders not directly involved in the NRM planning process, there was a general lack of awareness and even misunderstanding of the role of the regional NRM body and, where it fitted in the bigger picture of regional activity. This also included perceptions of the regional body as an arm of government or another layer of bureaucracy rather than a community-based initiative. Another common concern was the current and future role of **Landcare** groups in some regions and the need for clarifying how they fitted into new regional arrangements. The need to clarify roles and responsibilities of regional bodies in funding **public versus private benefits** to maintain a given regional asset was an emerging issue.

NRM plans effectively 'map' planning and management networks in regions

Interviewees identified **NRM plans** as playing a role in helping to keep government and other stakeholders 'honest' by documenting agreed regional priorities. Evidence from the review of plans indicated that regional NRM plans generally described and captured the planning system well, and provided a very comprehensive map of the different stakeholders, their roles and responsibilities and NRM activities in the regions. Similarly they recognised and described the range of networks, alliances, service providers, programs, agencies, forums etc. at different scales in the region and sometimes extended to identifying gaps, areas requiring clarification or opportunities for cooperation.

S4 Participation and engagement structures

'Integrity and inclusiveness of participation and engagement structures is apparent.'

Across the regional NRM bodies in Queensland, there was no prescribed model for establishing membership of regional NRM bodies/boards or for stakeholder engagement in the related regional NRM planning processes. The regional bodies are non-statutory and are established as single legal entities through a 'designation' process under the Trust Bilateral agreement between the Queensland and Australian Governments. Under this process, each regional body is expected to have a majority community membership that is inclusive of all relevant stakeholder interests including local government and Indigenous interests.

Membership structures in regional bodies are evolving

In practice, the establishment of regional bodies has occurred through a diversity of processes. Importantly, the majority of the regional body respondents considered that the **process for selecting members** of the regional NRM bodies or boards was appropriate in their region in terms of, for example, being a largely transparent and open, inclusive of relevant interests and having integrity of representation. In this context, some respondents identified that appropriateness depended on the regional body concerned stage of development and the particular regional institutional context. In many cases the regional bodies are evolving, or are planning to evolve, their structure and membership over time (e.g. starting with some experienced heads, but evolving to a more open model of broader involvement).

Despite the diversity of approaches, two common models emerged: representational and skills-based.

Representational models tended to be quite large and were mostly supported by an executive committee. Some of these models are based on sector or peak body nominated representatives, or representatives from existing catchment committees in the region. Several regions noted that this relied on 'sectors' being self-managing in selecting, endorsing and using their representative. Other representational models used a more open 'nomination and election' process based on a broad stakeholder forum but with caveats on final sectoral endorsement of the 'elected' representative and on maintaining a broad mix of members.

The representational approach was reported to support more ownership, better involvement and to be "quite democratically sound". Drawbacks identified include perceptions that these bodies were often large, cumbersome, inefficient and difficult to get decisions made. From observations, this was also the experience in the early stages of the north RCG, where the intent to be inclusive of all government parties contributed to temporarily marginalising regional bodies from that forum to avoid it becoming too large and unwieldy.

Skills-based models of regional NRM boards tend to be smaller in size, and are generally formed by stakeholders nominating a selection panel to assess applications on merit in terms of 'skills and proficiency', or, through government appointment of members. Respondents considered benefits of these models included reducing the effects of sectoral affiliations that might obstruct 'good' decision-making; and avoiding 'jobs for the boys'. In some regions, however, skills-based models were also seen to "disenfranchise the community", risked being seen as exclusive, and as having responsibility to the board rather than stakeholders per se. In regions where government has had **direct involvement** in the appointment of NRM board members, there were perceptions that it was less of a community process and likened to "picking the big boys in town". Some regional body respondents also reported a tendency for skills-based boards to revert to representational thinking at times. For example, one respondent noted that in practice, "people tend to naturally go back to the representative model for board operation on a day-to-day basis, such that currently the skills-based arrangements are not drawing on the available skills on the board in a well-defined manner".

Importantly skills-based approaches also invariably required an 'additional' mechanism to seek input from the broader stakeholder community. Mechanisms perceived by respondents to be highly successful included variations of regional forums such as stakeholders' councils, or relying on sectoral membership from subregional organisations.

Regional bodies also had different **membership rights** relating to voting or decision making. In one example, the regional body stratified members into voting members (regional organisations/peak bodies), non-voting members (government and science providers and some sectors) and associate members (people from outside the region, such as tourism). In another model the regional NRM board

comprised five broad sectors (e.g. industry, local government, conservation, Indigenous and community) where each sector had 20 per cent of the vote regardless of how many people from a sector attended a meeting. Other regions have used a multi-tiered membership structure based on a sector-based board that was supported by either a separate broad stakeholder council or a partnership panel that was open to any sector representative not included on the Board.

Two-thirds of respondents believed that membership of regional NRM bodies was generally **inclusive of all relevant interests**, or at least at this stage of development of the regional NRM process. A common response however was it is difficult to assess where the 'list' of stakeholders starts and stops in many instances.

In some regions, the current structure of the regional body was dictated, at least in part, by previous regionally based organisations that specified the initial scope of stakeholder representatives (e.g. in Desert Channels, Cape York). While in other cases the new regional NRM body was based on existing structures (e.g. the Landcare Council of the Northern Territory). **Prior regional structures** (e.g. regional NRM strategy groups under the NHT) proved valuable in setting up current governance arrangements for some regions. While in other cases, some respondents expressed concern regarding the credibility of the new regional bodies, as there had been no or little change so as "not to rock the boat".

Securing conservation, marine and Indigenous 'representation' on NRM boards has been difficult

Some **common 'gaps' in representation** on boards or in broader stakeholder involvement processes emerged during 2003–04, (see also *P2 Capacity to participate*) including:

- The **conservation sector**, particularly in western Queensland regions, where there is an absence of an identifiable 'sector' to fill that role locally. In these cases regions were encouraged to 'bring in' a representative from Brisbane, Townsville or Cairns;
- **Coastal and marine interests**. For example, a renewed government focus on coastal and marine issues saw regions looking to fill this gap during 2004. Regions such as the Burdekin and Fitzroy used connections with sub-regional groups to meet this need.
- **Indigenous interests**. Most regions in 2004 worked to initiate or improve existing involvement arrangements with Traditional Owners and other Indigenous interests. Identifying these interests, being aware of and negotiating appropriate protocols and addressing issues of financial or facilitated support were significant challenges identified for many regions.

Defence, urban communities and tourism are the 'missing' sectors in regions

Equally important to note is what interviews did *not* report and what was *not evident* in NRM plans. Even when pressures and benefits of tourism use were recognised, the **tourism sector** was repeatedly referred to as an 'external' stakeholder or pressure on the region. This was reflected strongly in NRM plans where this sector's management aspirations or 'voice' was difficult to define or identify. Another major land manager whose 'voice' was notably absent from NRM plans and as potential co-investors was **defence**. Engaging the **urban community** was seen as a universal challenge with a considerable disjunct between NRM seen as predominantly rural issues and the role of urban and external stakeholders as resource users and consumers.

S5 Adequate regional resourcing

'Resources are adequate to support regional NRM planning and long-term certainty exists regarding future funding.'

It was commonly recognised that collaborative and adaptive regional arrangements required certainty of long-term funding support and adequate resourcing for capacity building and monitoring and evaluation activities to achieve a strategic focus. Only half of the key informants interviewed (regional body and agency staff) considered regional bodies had **sufficient funding** to strategically deliver regional NRM. However, many informants recognised there was "more funding now" for NRM in many regions than before, and also accepted that NRM funding was a "competitive business" and that there would "never be enough funds". The high cost of travel for large-area regions was also reported as a major limiting factor to the strategic capability of regional bodies.

Uneven distribution of agency support across regions

Observations and interviews also pointed to **inequitable servicing** or resourcing to NRM regions by state government agencies. Many discussions within RCGs concerned how agencies might deliver or allocate support services (e.g. data, technical advice, organisational support or representation) to regional bodies during their start-up and planning phases. Some regional bodies raised concerns over a 'poor cousin syndrome' emerging where the existing location of staff tended to be where most in-kind or other support is captured, leaving some regions (generally in the western parts of the state) with relatively limited support. A key example in 2004 was the capacity of regional agency staff to equitably service or allocate resources across the six extensive NRM regions in North Queensland.

One agency estimated providing 400-500 hours of advisory and technical support for one RCG region alone during NRM plan development

Some regional agency staff expressed concerns about the high levels of **in-kind support** "tied-up" in the current planning phase and that the existing support they provided was "undervalued" or not recognised by regional NRM bodies or the Australian Government. One NR&M member noted that their agency had provided between 400 and 500 hours of advisory and technical support from their region alone during NRM plan development phase.

Interviews revealed different expectations among regions of the breadth and level of skills required to implement NRM initiatives in a strategic way. In part this related to different stages regions had reached in the planning process, and their remoteness from large urban or administrative centres. **Critical skills required** (and difficult to secure in some regions) reported by interviewees included extension; GIS and related data management; facilitation and coordination skills; corporate governance; and 'technical' environmental management skills.

Key challenges in accessing the necessary required skills identified by regional body respondents included:

- Bridging changing skill requirements from planning to implementation needs.
- Withdrawal of extension services for land management over last 10 to 15 years, compared with an 'abundance' of coordinators and facilitators.
- Negotiating new contractual or service agreements with government to supply technical services to regional bodies.
- Concerns of agency 'protectionism' and cost-shifting.
- Overcoming distributional equity issues of agencies servicing regions (as discussed above).

Given limited staffing or people resources in some regions, regional NRM bodies were adopting a range of mechanisms to address these challenges (see also *S1 Coherent policy and governance structures* and *P5 Linking scales and activities*).

Regional body approaches to harnessing needed skills and resources

These approaches were often strongly linked to a given region's business or operating model and included:

- Maintaining minimum staff and 'building the communities skills and knowledge to implement'.
- Developing partnerships to harness skills and support from other regional bodies (acting in a service provider role), agency scientific or technical staff, and regional industry stakeholders. A key example was the emerging role of **cross-regional agreements** to fund implementation activities or support management in low-resourced or remote regions such as Cape York, the Gulf regions, and Desert Channels.
- Seeking efficiencies through coordination or 'delivering through others' activities, co-investment and alliances to stretch the money further.
- Increasing the formal role of women in regional NRM.

S6 Monitoring return on investment

‘Mechanisms are in place to monitor and assess returns on investment.’

As identified in interviews with key informants, a number of key challenges currently face regional bodies and state agencies in effectively and adequately monitoring return on investment in regional NRM. The most fundamental challenge identified was how to measure and what to measure. For example, one respondent identified that “a critical issue is going to be how to actually measure progress or outputs that contribute towards targets”.

Part of this challenge involved regions adequately defining the return to be monitored, including factors such as:

- Communities’ investment of time.
- Social returns such as sustainable production and viable communities.
- ‘Equity of return’ such as returns to Indigenous communities or compensation to landholders, or
- Defining ‘sustainable’ ecosystem outcomes.

Notwithstanding, a small number of the regional NRM plans did outline indicators such as changes in capacity to pay, industry viability, and improved coordination or frequency of resource conflicts for monitoring return on investment. How these were to be measured was less clear in those plans.

Demonstrating causal links is a major challenge

Demonstrating causal links between investment and returns also emerged as a major challenge. Multiple activities and funding sources through multiple institutions made determining reasons for returns on investment, or lack thereof, exceptionally problematic. Difficulty in influencing some of the major drivers on resource management and use (e.g. development or drought) and the relatively limited funding also clouded the issue. Many regional respondents saw detectable landscape scale change at least eight or 10 years away (see also *O3 Improved resource condition*).

More than one-third of management actions in plans deliver on information gathering and monitoring systems

It was widely understood and expressed by regional bodies and agency staff that good monitoring and evaluation structures would be critical for tracking and responding to changing management and investment needs. This was reflected in NRM plans with a large amount of the investment priorities (more than one-third of management actions in most plans) allocated to deliverables such as information gathering and monitoring systems. A major concern of regional bodies was that these were considered as ‘undesirable’ investments politically, and would not be approved, limiting their capability to adequately monitor returns on regional NRM investment.

Interview respondents identified a number of requirements for demonstrating and monitoring return on investment. These included:

Community support—that is, through demonstrating some short-term outcomes and that the NRM planning process belonged to local communities. For example, one informant stated “If you don’t have the community involved they [communities] think that you’re [the regional body] just wasting money”.

Continuity—allowing regional institutions to mature so that outcomes can be achieved; and,

Skills—for example, capacity in designing and applying triple bottom line assessments is lacking in some regions which are experiencing difficulty in securing satisfactory applicants for positions to support this function (see also *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*).

Central to the understanding of return on investment was the **accountability relationships** between the community, the regional body and government players. There was a general understanding that regional bodies must be accountable for delivering to both their communities and to government investors. This was not as easy as it appeared as regional bodies were “walking the line” between tight accountability to government, the need to partner government to affect or realise the return on regional investment while, at the same time, avoiding perceptions of (or in effect becoming) part of government. The difficulty of this balancing act was compounded by the current perceived climate of an uncommitted State Government during 2004–05 (see *C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment*).

Regional body respondents also identified that they were overly burdened by excessive and complex accountability reporting that did not reflect regional return on investment. Moreover, the rhetoric of shared ownership underpinning the regional NRM planning approach was not consistent with varying perceptions of reciprocal commitment or clarity of accountabilities for planning and implementation between government, communities and regional bodies.

S7 Structures for integrating knowledge

'Structures support data and information sharing and integration in planning. Effective information and knowledge management arrangements including access to external expertise, science and science providers.'

Information systems in place are considered inadequate to do the job

Regional body planners widely reported the information systems currently in place in many regions were not fit to do the job, but that they had done the best with what they had to work with within the timeframes. An over-riding consideration for regional investment was reported to be the need to develop **information management systems** in which the community has confidence, and that can provide interpreted information to inform decision-making. The level of regional investment required to do this however was considered to be politically unacceptable in terms of program funding priorities.

In developing NRM plans, regional bodies and agency staff agreed that **expertise** from outside the regional body is invaluable. Examples were cited where regions had lost key staff or lacked external institutional support to "bring the science together" as having negative effects in the early stage of the planning process.

Regions are taking quite different approaches to **technical or scientific advisory structures** or using other means for incorporating technical or scientific information. Virtual networks comprising government and research institution staff or permanent regional technical panels associated with regional bodies were re-invigorated or established during the planning phase in most regions. Regions also relied on short-term outsourcing to consultants or commissioning of work to research providers such as Cooperative Research Centres or state agencies.

Discussions in some RCG forums in mid-2004, exploring options for state government support to these technical advisory structures, exposed inequity in regional bodies' capability to access agency support. Maintaining a business-as-usual approach appeared to be the outcome, in which **responsibility** for negotiating contributions of individual state agencies to these structures rested with regional bodies.

To obtain technical information for planning, some regions relied heavily on the government review of their draft plans. Others relied on existing **long-term strategic partnerships** with specific providers such as CRCs, GBRMPA or using the 'brokering' abilities of organisations such as *Moreton Bay Partnerships* to access science and policy networks. The value of CRCs such as Coastal Zone and Estuary Management, Desert Knowledge, Tropical Savannas, and Rainforest were widely recognised as providing a valuable pathway to negotiate data sharing or science collaboration outside inflexible state bureaucracies. It is evident through RCG observations and interviews that east coast regions in Queensland generally had greater access to educational institutions and knowledge brokers than western regions.

State agencies 'filled the gap' where regions were unable to access other technical support

Although by no means the case for all regions, the state did appear to provide technical expertise in interpreting and applying their resource data to the NRM planning process. With regional information 'systems' still in their infancy, data sharing and technical support still relies heavily on personal commitment of individuals within agencies. Most NRM regions have tended to align themselves with one of the core agencies or vice versa. Positive and workable **data sharing agreements** are reportedly emerging between regional NRM bodies and agencies such as DPI&F and NR&M. State and territory government agencies in their role as the primary NRM information custodians often 'filled the gap' where regions were unable to access 'other' technical support. Agencies also reported contributing 'technical expertise to compliment regional bodies practical expertise' during the plan development and accreditation phases.

Quality regional mapping and satellite data is difficult to access

The absence of a level playing field of **data availability and suitability** for regional planning was strongly apparent. This was particularly the case regarding the application of resource condition and trend information within regional NRM plans. In several cases the state was perceived to have backed away from its primary responsibility to provide quality natural resource information in some areas (e.g. soils and land condition in rangelands regions). Regional bodies also reported the quality of water quality data varied markedly from region to region, leaving them, in their view, to fund basic regional scale resource condition assessment. There was also widely considered to be an absence of quality mapping at appropriate scales for regional and sub-regional planning and satellite imagery was reportedly difficult to access through the state.

Recurring **gaps in the information base** (reported in interviews and evident in NRM plans) included:

- Basic data on groundwater, sediments, nutrients to assess **water quality**;
- Understanding **connectivity** between terrestrial and marine systems.
- **Cumulative impacts** on rangelands biodiversity.
- Effects of resource use on climate change and carbon budgets, or, linking climate, fire and soil carbon management.
- Linking natural **resource industry trends** with capacity to pay or incentive design (or appraisal of incentive-based proposals by government).
- Generally poor availability of quality **socio-economic knowledge** including ‘mapping’ social, cultural or other **values in landscapes**.

Box 9: Lack of information

“[There] has been a constant ‘re-digging’ over the same locations of research in the region—the red and yellow earths for example, cover most of the north but are the least studied. While the most robust land systems have been studied in the most detail—the less resilient and widespread systems are largely left ignored”.

Interview respondent, Burdekin

The number of **‘interim’ resource condition targets** present in NRM plans—that is, “targets to set targets”—was highly indicative of data limitations or poor applicability of state and national standards to diverse regions (see also *P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values*).

Local, traditional and industry knowledge are highly valued in ‘low data’ regions

In this ‘low data’ context, local, traditional and industry knowledge are highly valued and incorporated into the planning process (see *P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values*). It was also widely recognised that an explicit adaptive management approach to information for target review and indicator selection was required. The **desire for improved information** to support management and monitoring was equally evident in management actions in NRM plans (see also *S6 Monitoring return on investment*).

One experience from the Southern Gulf region highlighted challenges with **intellectual property** under the NHT program in applying Indigenous knowledge. In this case, all knowledge generated under a project contract would be the property of Southern Gulf Catchments, thereby not recognising the knowledge property of traditional owners. Respondents in the region also believed the federal and state legislation appeared to be at odds. In this case a project agreement was suspended until the issue could be resolved.

Deficiencies in implementation expertise identified by respondents included the social science of volunteerism; skills in evaluating what would be the ‘best value for money’ investments; and generally skills required in providing monitoring and reporting systems to track implementation (see *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*).

P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values

'Regional processes and tools support the integration of different types of information, knowledge and values including target setting, priority setting, and engagement processes.'

The **knowledge offered by local, traditional and industry stakeholders** provided important contributions to the NRM planning process and design of implementation frameworks (see also *P5 Linking scales and activities* and *S7 Structures for integrating knowledge*). This was particularly the case in northern remote regions that defined themselves as 'low data' regions.

Reported benefits of using this knowledge to inform regional NRM plans included improved accuracy of mapping and local or regional applicability of resource condition and management targets. This knowledge was reportedly being similarly applied in related statutory activity to ground-truth local suitability of regulatory codes for vegetation management (e.g. for weeds or thinning practices). Indigenous cultural or ecological knowledge was also identified as important for many regional NRM plans, particularly in the north. However the practical methods or rationale for incorporating knowledge from Indigenous people was not clear in the plans themselves.

The knowledge, views or values of major resource users such as tourists were largely considered to be 'external' to the region's community and were not often used to inform NRM targets or solutions (see also *S4 Participation and engagement structures*). From the review of plans, the **definition of 'community'** shifted depending on the planning stage. For example, most regions considered the community in its broadest sense in the initial consultation phase. However, by the implementation phase, the community was largely defined as the regional body itself and peak industry and sectoral organisations and was sometimes inclusive of state agencies.

Managing science and scientists

Technical support was highly valued by regional bodies but difficult getting scientists to nominate targets

External scientific or technical support was generally highly valued by regional bodies and government agency staff (see *S6 Monitoring return on investment*). Even so, several interviewees from regional bodies expressed frustration by the scientists' "unwillingness" to nominate suitable targets or "inability" to convert existing data into an information base to support regional planning. As one interviewee explained:

The region knows the science—knows what works and what's causing impacts yet no scientist will give hard answers on tree clearing and land management to support target development.

Interviewees from regional bodies also commented on the high transaction costs involved in managing scientists and researchers and ensuring alignment of that research with local or regional priorities (including appropriateness to community defined needs). A respondent from the Torres Strait stated for example:

...An important approach will be using traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge in partnership. The region needs scientific work but seasonal and temporal issues can make research redundant so need to involve traditional knowledge...

Learning curve for the scientific community

According to state agency respondents, the converse was also true, with the recent planning activity being a significant learning curve for the scientific community:

... [the planning process] has started to make scientists think about how science is done and delivered so that it can make an impact on regional planning...

Managing regional community stakeholder input

Community consultation and engagement processes were reported as pivotal to capture and integrate relevant information for regional NRM plans. This was particularly the case in scoping, negotiating and refining NRM targets and priorities as well as seeking stakeholder support for an ever-growing NRM agenda. In regions that did not have much scientific data, the consultation process was a critical tool used to gauge long-term resource condition and trends.

Engagement processes adopted for plans, focused on setting up a 'longer-term' dialogue

Regional bodies also released 'information papers' or newsletters, encouraged public submissions, and used the media and community meetings in the early phases of consultation. This shifted to more focused sectoral, technical, stakeholder, sub-regional or catchment workshops during the middle and latter parts of the planning process. The engagement processes adopted by most regional NRM bodies was often seen to be setting up or maintaining a longer and broader dialogue with and between regional stakeholders, beyond the short term imperative of plan development (see also *P2 Capacity to participate*). Thus the effort expended and time required was considerably greater than anticipated by the state and Australian governments.

Gulf regions offer different approach to engagement

Some engagement approaches used in remote and rangelands regions were highly effective at improving the understanding of and support for regional NRM planning processes. Early in the planning phase in the Northern Gulf, for example, the regional NRM body undertook a phone survey of all land managers in their region eliciting public knowledge about the regional body and reactions to proposed courses of action. This provided a data record and an ongoing methodology to track changes in community stakeholder knowledge, priorities and behaviour. It formed an important part of the regional body's communication planning, monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Southern Gulf Catchments emphasised the importance of direct personal contact with regional stakeholders (particularly grazing land managers) to ensure credibility and support for the NRM plan and planning process and undertook extensive face-to-face, informal conversations in rural areas and towns around the region. (See also *S4 Participation and engagement structures*).

Target setting process

Regions relied heavily on knowledge from industries and land managers to set targets

Setting resource condition and management targets that were measurable, but also politically acceptable, were major challenges to the NRM planning process. In many cases, target development relied on the testing of condition and trend information through the community, industry and scientific community engagement processes. Respondents reported this approach contributed to more realistic and acceptable targets in plans. In these cases rather than being *the* primary driver, scientific or technical information provided the 'safety net' or check and balance to outcomes from this process. In many cases the importance of community input and the role of science and policy to inform regional NRM challenged assumptions about the nature of target setting outlined in program rules and political spheres during 2004.

Interestingly, interviewees reported NRM targets generated from this community-based planning process were **generally more prescriptive** or ecologically conservative than targets suggested by government staff. A common experience was the considerable effort required from both statutory and regional body planners to 'translate' statutory objectives into regional NRM plans.

Setting regional NRM priorities

Decision-support tools were used as 'part' of the priority setting process

Approaches used to set regional priorities varied markedly between regions—ranging from structured multi-criteria analysis approaches, use of environmental benefits indices, to consensus techniques, technical forums or combinations of these. Most people interviewed reported that setting priorities required the management of multiple values and expectations, and large volumes of 'gap-ridden' data proved one of the most difficult aspects of NRM plan development. Both government and regional body players stated they had considerably underestimated the complexity and significance of the priority setting until being "in the middle of it". Even agency staff admitted that regional bodies were being asked to do what government had been unable to achieve to date. Despite this, regional bodies reported the outcomes were largely satisfactory, while recognising the inherent subjectivity and limitations of the process.

What did plans actually prioritise?

There appeared a noticeable **diversity in what was actually prioritised** between the regions, including management actions and management action targets, resource condition targets in some cases and in others, 'issues' or 'pressures' were prioritised defined by an analysis of assets and threats.

Traditional owner aspirations

The initial rounds of priority setting saw generally **lower rankings** for cultural heritage, Indigenous resource management, and climate change or carbon management. In the case of Indigenous resource management issues, several regions reported this was not indicative of the broad support for Traditional Owners and their management priorities but rather a function of limitations of the **‘ranking’ tools that favoured discrete biophysical issues** or issues that would attract government program funding priorities. The Interim Kimberley NRM Group (a sub-region of the Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group) reported⁸, used a different approach to priority setting criteria. This involved applying three criteria explicitly focused on the value of proposed actions to meet Indigenous natural and cultural resource management outcomes.

Regional NRM bodies often responded to limitations of the priority setting process in recognising Indigenous values or interests after the formal priority setting stage. This included support for Indigenous NRM aspirations within investment programs aimed at addressing biophysical issues (e.g. weeds or water quality) or jointly designing a discrete ‘parallel’ investment program with Traditional Owners.

Other **key challenges** in setting targets and priorities nominated by regional bodies included the:

- Need to balance community and stakeholder-derived priorities with program priorities.
- Lack of clarity on how priorities identified through the NRM planning process relate to development priorities in other planning processes (e.g. regional frameworks for growth management).
- Need to maintain the connection through from higher order plan ‘goals’ to priority management actions and the portfolio of investment activities.
- Need to reconcile sub-regional targets and priorities at the regional scale—while keeping them ‘alive’ to those in the sub-region to improve local management relevance⁹.
- Ability to demonstrate to stakeholders how local activities impact on regional resource condition targets—particularly where impact areas are distant or physically remote such as the Great Barrier Reef for some grazing communities;
- Staggered nature of target setting due to the timing of sub-regional planning processes, or responding to new data sources; and
- Tensions between economic and environmental criteria in priority setting and the ability to incorporate—or reflect—social and economic considerations (e.g. impacts of climate variability and commodity prices on producers’ ability to adopt sustainable practices, or subsistence or cultural values for Indigenous communities).

Another avenue for considering social and economic values was through impact assessment and/or cost-benefit analysis of proposed actions. Most regional NRM planners indicated that these detailed assessments of **costs and benefits of proposed actions** would occur as part of designing and implementing the regional investment strategies. It was believed that this approach would help focus limited resources on the priority investments identified.

Knowledge integration for collaborative action

It was regularly observed that negotiation on **specific projects or funding proposals** between sectors, agency staff and regional bodies provided a practical and productive point of focus for collective action. Similarly, the development of regional investment strategies (as opposed to NRM plan development) was widely considered the ‘critical point for collaboration’ between regional stakeholders. Informants from regional bodies also reported that the adoption of a **‘place-based’ implementation** framework at sub-regional or ‘district’ scales) greatly improved the manageability and integration of scientific data, technical knowledge and industry or land manager knowledge.

The **expertise of rural industry groups** as ‘implementation partners’ was also widely valued by regional bodies in the design of incentives, communication strategies and property planning investments. Landcare networks were also identified in some regions as ‘relationship experts’ for

8 NRM planners Project workshop, March 2005, Brisbane.

9 Different from Fitzroy approach where subregional targets were set to be consistent with regional outcomes i.e. draft targets for consultation drawn from the one resource assessment process as a template for subregions.

implementation. **Agency expertise** in extension and on-ground management skills (e.g. for grazing, fire management and soil conservation) were also considered highly valuable and even essential by some regional bodies for implementing their plans. Other regional bodies intended to shift away from a reliance on government agency input and move on the consolidation and improved capacity of community stakeholders to implement the regional NRM plan.

Spatial priorities at subregional scales supports integration of different knowledges

Regional bodies generally avoided **spatial priority setting** until investment partnerships had been developed with a given sector. Therefore regional NRM plans did not often reveal how NRM priorities related to particular areas in the region. NRM body informants noted the sensitivities involved in this process and the effort taken to ensure that particular sectors did not perceive that they were unfairly targeted by the NRM plan. As a result, spatial priority setting more commonly occurred through using industry-based or sub-regional implementation frameworks agreed with sectors. Examples included the sub-catchment planning in QMDC and the 'neighbourhood catchments' approach adopted in the Fitzroy Basin region. In the Fitzroy Basin, this involved using GIS to integrate biodiversity assessment mapping, water quality hotspots, salinity, and community willingness to participate to identify key locations for investment. In December 2004, FBA reported this approach had improved the 'shared focus' among local community stakeholders, agency technical and extension staff for identifying priority sub-catchments for investment. Experience from the Wet Tropics region (FNQNRM Ltd), also stressed the importance of good quality and accessible regional and sub-regional scale mapping to identify priority areas for management partnerships and in communicating the need for an integrated response.

There was a wide belief among government agency staff and regional NRM bodies that some form of **property management planning would be a cornerstone of implementation** over the next three years. In rangelands regions, improving remote sensing capabilities were perceived by interviewees to be critical in supporting this approach. There was also evidence of regional bodies 'piggy-backing' on and adding value to the application of property scale mapping undertaken as part of state government property management planning initiatives (e.g. incorporating property maps of assessable vegetation into broader management goals).

P2 Capacity to participate

'Capacity exists for all players to participate in regional planning, management or implementation processes.'

The notion of 'capacity' was defined by respondents as including the existence of the opportunity or option to participate; the capability to participate; or quality of performance of members on the regional NRM bodies/boards. Despite these different definitions, there was agreement regarding the components of capacity as including:

- *Institutional capacity*—linked to opportunities in NRM arrangements to allow participation at different levels and at different times.
- *Resourcing, social and economic capacity*—linked to organisational or individual ability to participate in terms of availability of time and funding/finances.
- *Knowledge or information capacity*—linked to existing knowledge base in region, awareness of NRM issues and accessibility of information.
- *Communication capacity*—linked to appropriateness of language, tight timeframes to make decisions and ability to communicate complexity of issues to community and report back on views.
- *Attitudinal capacity*—refers to motivation or will to participate.

Additionally, issues such as remoteness, weather and industry seasonal demands and issues with land claims, for example, impacted on the *flexibility* of people to participate.

Regional bodies devoted a significant amount of support and effort to consultation programs in order to gain widespread and integrated views of the regional assets. Some **innovative strategies** included:

- Staff employed specifically to support consultation with stakeholders, or funds provided to support stakeholder participation at NRM planning meetings and forums.
- Use of existing networks and organisations (e.g. peak industry bodies) to improve the scope of community stakeholders and their capacity to engage in regional NRM planning processes and decisions.
- Support for Indigenous groups to contribute their views and contribution to NRM through consultation processes that were supported by the wider Indigenous community.
- Use of various types of regional working groups established to consider particular stakeholders (e.g. Indigenous) or a mix of scientific, technical and community representatives to review feedback and recommendations from wider consultation processes.

Other approaches reported included investing in information sharing and communication strategies (e.g. newsletters, advertisements in media), research and monitoring (e.g. through partnerships) and other capacity building activities (e.g. field days on key NRM issues; cultural awareness raising programs).

When asked if all stakeholders in their region had the capacity to participate in regional NRM processes and activities, roughly half of respondents stated that building stakeholders' capacity in the region was an important activity. They also emphasised that stakeholders had varying capacities (skills, interests, aspirations) to contribute to regional NRM on a range of issues.

Despite these efforts, challenges for stakeholder groups to be able to engage in regional NRM remained. For example, a common opinion expressed in RCG forums and by informants was that many **local governments** lacked the capacity to participate adequately or effectively in the planning process and that sustaining local government involvement "continued to be difficult". (See also *C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment*, *P5 Linking scales and activities*, and *S2 Aligned institutions*). Many interviewees felt that local governments were overwhelmed by the planning scheme review process and lacked the sufficient staffing and resources to participate effectively in NRM business. Even so, analysis of the interviews revealed that poor engagement by local governments is not always the case.

The nature and scope of local governments' participation varies across regions and included:

- Current and ex-local government councilors played key leadership roles on NRM boards.
- Considerable cooperation on development of regional and shire pest management plans, particularly in north Queensland regions.
- Ongoing negotiations about current and future potential links between regional integrated planning activities, ROCs and regional NRM bodies.

Effective approaches for working with Indigenous communities

The challenges of **engaging Indigenous communities** in the regional NRM process were widely recognised (see also *P3 Procedural fairness*). Regional NRM plan accreditation required regional bodies to undertake effective engagement with Indigenous peoples and it was recommended that relevant Traditional Owner groups were consulted at the early stages of the plan rather than after all other stakeholders had contributed to the plan. A common view expressed was that continued and considerable investment in time, resources and relationship building was needed to negotiate and establish Indigenous representation and involvement in regional NRM. Even so a number of successful and culturally appropriate engagement strategies were developed in some regions. This included the appointment of Indigenous project officer(s) or consultancy to act as a facilitator between Traditional Owners and the wider NRM planning process, workshops to discuss Traditional Owner concerns and aspirations and, in the case of the Wet Tropics, a parallel planning and investment process that linked to the broader regional NRM plan. The dedicated planning process to capture and integrate Indigenous values and priorities in the Burdekin Dry Tropics region was so effective it was considered to be nationally significant by some state agency members.

Time constraints strained efforts to implement good negotiation on plans and investment proposals and reduced effectiveness of stakeholder engagement

The challenge faced by regional bodies to engage some community stakeholder groups, including Indigenous peoples, was increased by the limitations on the **capacity of government agencies and funding programs**. Key areas that limited institutional capacity were identified as including the ability of governments to provide different options or opportunities for stakeholder groups to participate; the need for different government agencies to have a strategic view of NRM that were not necessarily aligned; and the cumbersome nature of government agency structures and decision-making processes. Interview respondents also raised frustrations with government funding programs (see also *SI Coherent policy and governance structures*). RCG and regional body informants noted that time constraints imposed by government agencies keen to get funding dollars out the door strained efforts to implement good negotiation practices, limited co-development and review of NRM proposals and reduced the effectiveness of community stakeholder engagement and participation in the regional NRM process. This was seen to have serious implications for conducting effective Indigenous consultation processes, particularly in the northern regions. RCG members also noted that unrealistic timeframes limited local government commitment. RCG members also expressed concerns in mid-2004 that the State was being by-passed due to the Australian Government providing advice directly to regional bodies (e.g. encouraging Boards to fast track the consultation period).

Funding guidelines and procedures also imposed **limitations on the capacity of stakeholder input** into target setting. Informants from regional bodies recalled the frustration of receiving government advice late in the planning process that discouraged explicit funding for cultural resource management outcomes. It was also widely recognised that Indigenous people became frustrated by the NRM process because they were required to disaggregate components of their resource management systems and aspirations to only consider environmental issues rather than other issues, such as community health and employment that Indigenous groups felt were equally important (see also *SI Coherent policy and governance structures*). In some regions, innovative solutions to this issue had been initiated. For example, an Indigenous Parkinsonia management team was being formed in the Desert Channels to address both weed management and Traditional Owner management responsibilities to waterholes in the region.

P3 Procedural fairness

‘Processes that supported regional NRM were widely perceived to be fair’

Respondents from regional bodies emphasised the need for the NRM planning process to be fair and stressed the importance that all stakeholders felt a sense of ownership of NRM plans and outcomes. Regional bodies responded to this issue by dedicating considerable time and resources to inform and engage as many regional stakeholders as possible (refer to *P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values* and *S4 Participation and engagement structures*).

Many state government and regional body informants viewed local government involvement in the NRM agenda as a key challenge to an inclusive community stakeholder perspective. Issues associated with this such as local government concerns of cost-shifting were discussed in *C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment*, *S2 Aligned institutions* and *S4 Participation and engagement structures*).

An important principle held by regional bodies was that regional NRM outcomes must not unnecessarily or unfairly burden land managers and regional industries. This principle underlay the development and proposed implementation of regional NRM plans. Several of the plans reviewed included explicit considerations to minimise negative **social and economic consequences** of proposed targets and interventions. For example, outlining the suite of management targets likely to generate negative social impacts a commitment was made to undertake social impact assessment to inform implementation of these targets¹⁰. Another regional NRM plan¹¹ explicitly defined **cost-sharing principles** for resource management to support improved equity in the costs and benefits of plan implementation and investment decisions. This alone was a significant progress in this aspect of planning.

Agency members of RCGs and regional body informants also noted that stakeholder representation on the boards of regional bodies was a critical ingredient to ensure community stakeholder ownership of the planning process. Interviews with informants from regional bodies highlighted the complexity of the selection processes for these board members, which inevitably involved weighing up the benefits of expertise in NRM issues versus good representation of key stakeholder groups (see also *S4 Participation and engagement structures*, and *S3 Roles and responsibilities*). Considerable effort was made to ensure board membership was transparent, fair and regularly reviewed. Even so, it was noted by interviewees that NRM boards judged to have good stakeholder representation did struggle to think regionally when trying to reach consensus on key NRM issues. This issue was tested during a board’s involvement in setting priorities for NRM targets and investments. Despite limitations to this process, regional body informants felt that board members were effective and fair in balancing the aspirations of the stakeholders they represented with other NRM issues and interests.

The effort and pride in gaining community stakeholder support for an NRM board and its decisions was evident in the interviews with regional body representatives and the review of the regional NRM plans. As stated by the Board of the Southern Gulf region, the planning process must meet government accreditation requirements “but if it does not capture the interests and aspirations of the community, the process and plan will have failed”.

Regional bodies considered threats to maintaining continued community commitment included the exclusion of regional bodies from discussions on plan accreditation by state agencies and perceptions of poor transparency of that decision-making process. A more inclusive and transparent accreditation approach generally developed over time. Even so, by late 2004, RCG forum observations identified additional concerns that state government was overstepping agreed directions from the community consultation or inserting last-minute or additional state interests into regional NRM plans. There were similar tensions around perceptions of **non-negotiated intervention** by the Australian Government in regions with similar claims of politically motivated eleventh-hour intervention—for example, imposed water quality targets in reef catchment regions. These concerns were countered by state and Australian government agencies asserting their roles as co-investors and regional stakeholders in the plans development.

10 Central Queensland Strategy for Sustainability 2, Fitzroy Basin Association

11 Regional NRM Plan, QMDC and South West NRM

P4 Adaptive and responsive processes

'Processes are adaptable and responsive to changes in understanding, values, priorities and external pressures. Strategies and approaches are used to facilitate change.'

The period from late 2003 to early 2005 was best characterised by constant and rapid change in operating environments, expectations and specifically, NRM planning requirements. Even the nature of the funding delivery system for programs and additions of new funding opportunities during this period required regional bodies, their stakeholders and regional agency staff to be highly 'responsive' and reactive.

Interview respondents discussed several approaches or philosophies that regional NRM bodies currently employ to respond to a changing planning environment and address challenges they face in the planning process. From interviews and observations these can be broadly summarised as:

- Enhancing regional capacity.
- Looking ahead.
- Learning from experience.
- Adopting problem-solving approaches.
- Following up and following through.
- Regional coordination groups and regional bodies responding to post-planning functions.

Enhancing regional capacity was seen as a primary strategy by regional bodies to facilitate change and deal with new challenges. This was reported to include bringing in external expertise where required and improving access to data and information (see *S7 Structures for integrating knowledge*), promoting educational activities to raise awareness of emerging problems, strengthening the Boards or management committees' capabilities and securing adequate specialist staff where required (see also *S5 Adequate regional resourcing*). Strengthening communication networks and links to sub-regional players were also seen as vital strategies.

Looking ahead

Regional bodies stressed the importance of keeping themselves informed about emerging issues or initiatives over the horizon, and just as importantly, keeping their stakeholders informed. Respondents firmly believed that "once it's happening, it's too late to be strategic or influence the process" so discussing likely future scenarios through board processes and, critically, through engagement networks was considered regular business practice. Some regional bodies saw this approach as improving their ability to 'buffer' impacts of external priorities.

Learning from experience

Regional bodies recognised they operated in a changing planning and political environment and expected things to change, "so plan for it". There was a common view of "accepting you probably won't get it right first time around" and expect to learn through the implementation of new approaches. Several techniques regional bodies employed which supported this adaptive approach included:

- Maintaining close relationships with other regional bodies and sharing successes and failures in their experiences, particularly of other regions that have been "going for a long time" (e.g. some regions even commissioned an initial consultancy to look at other regional arrangements before deciding on own approach).
- Recording their own experiences and decisions for future reference.
- Drawing on (negative and positive) experiences from previous consultation process in regions including statutory processes.
- Modifying a consultation process part way through to improve suitability of the process for regional stakeholders (e.g. Northern Gulf).

Regional body informants explained what had been learnt from initial consultation processes and what measures had been or needed to be taken to capture stakeholders who had not been involved in NRM planning to date. In some cases, consultation processes were tailored to target and engage with

particular stakeholder groups (in particular, Traditional Owners, remote landholders and urban residents).

A strong underlying principle of adaptive management was evident from the project team's review of regional NRM plans. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks universally made provision for reviews of the plans and investment strategies, and are generally explicit about how adaptive management will drive, for example, the ongoing improvement of resource condition and management action targets and the selection of indicators over time.

Adopting problem-solving approaches

Regional bodies and RCG members underlined the importance of negotiation as a primary tool and a willingness to explore several options or alternative views. Several regional bodies perceived they often played a mediation role between interest groups with conflicting aspirations. They also stressed the importance of designing processes that allowed for conflict to be managed. Part of this involved seeking input and direction from stakeholders before implementing or investing and considers how stakeholder management aspirations can be satisfied or complimented. Early involvement of stakeholders and **taking a sector-based approach** was widely recognised as valuable for adapting regional planning and investment to suit changing needs.

Following up and following through

If investing in awareness raising or changes in stakeholder attitudes, regional bodies stressed the importance of following up with support for management options, an implementation project, incentives, or 'somewhere to go' to harness the interest catalysed. The lesson here was "don't motivate stakeholders and then not provide a pathway for action".

Regional bodies responding to post-planning functions

There was also evidence through the RCG observation process that, particularly in the second half of 2004, regional bodies were rethinking their operation and composition to gear-up for implementation and monitoring functions post-accreditation of their regional NRM plans and investment strategies. At regular updates on their progress at RCG forums, groups reported changes to, or reviews of, representative structures and membership, sectoral agreements and terms of reference for their boards. This was particularly the case for a number of regions that had established 'interim' structures due to time pressures and a perceived lack of guidance in the early stages. Changes to regional body operation were also becoming evident as board members grew into an understanding of the job.

There were also attempts by state government to bring about change in regional structures of bodies, involving attempts to 'normalise' program delivery arrangements in two of Queensland's regions. At the time of the evaluation the success or efficacy of these approaches was at best unclear.

Regional agencies responding to changing needs

At regular intervals, the RCGs reviewed internal processes in particular their role, terms of reference, operating procedures and future priorities. This was in recognition of the fast approaching change for regional bodies into the implementation phase of their regional NRM plans. The outcomes from these reviews were largely positive and progressive. RCGs also regularly sought feedback from regional bodies at RCG forums and also demonstrated a general willingness to participate in this project as an evaluative process supporting adaptive management, actively sought feedback and in NRCC applied in-progress findings in their instruments for review.

In addition to adaptiveness and responsiveness, informants were questioned about the coherency and linkages between the regional NRM plans and other planning activities relevant to their region (see also *P5 Linking scales and activities* and *S2 Aligned institutions*). Many reported examples where the regional NRM plan making was influenced by other planning activities. These included vegetation management, water resource, integrated regional plans (for example regional frameworks for growth management) and for reef catchments, the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. One exception was Torres Strait where local and international issues (such as the Australia-PNG Treaty and the North Regional Marine plan) were more influential and plans such as water resource and vegetation management were absent. Where statutory regional plans did not exist (e.g. regional coastal plan), the regional body planners used state-wide instruments for direction.

The influence of local government planning schemes and other local government instruments (e.g. corporate plans) were reportedly less clear with respondents raising concerns over the real depth of understanding of schemes, despite most regional NRM plans mentioning or including references to the relevant ones for their region.

Some informants reported that other planning processes positively influenced the current regional body activities. Examples included providing opportunities to work with the same target groups of stakeholders and raising knowledge levels of statutory processes and the profile and understanding of NRM issues in the region (e.g. leasehold land strategy).

Conversely, past or concurrent processes were reported to have had a detrimental impact on regional bodies engaging with community and stakeholder groups in their region (see also *C4 Recognising regional diversity and complexity*). A number of issues raised included the confusion amongst stakeholder groups (reported regarding concurrent processes and the lack of clarity of respective roles of the various plans); and conflicting timetables (resulting in a lack of coordination of activities, in particular community and stakeholder engagement).

P5 Linking scales and activities

‘Processes supported and exhibited connectivity within and between scales.’

Coordination between statutory and voluntary planning activities is improving

RCG observations, NRM plan reviews and interviews all indicated that overall coordination between statutory and voluntary planning activities was gradually improving. This was largely due more to (and more targeted) interaction between regional bodies and agencies planners, managers and technical staff. Improvements in linkages were occurring in a number of ways from one plan ‘influencing’ the development of another; improved recognition of complimentary functions of different types of planning; and management of partnerships between planners. There was however still some unresolved questions about balancing regional development and the NRM agenda and the relationships between their relevant planning activities.

Complimentary and consistent plans

There was considerable evidence of regional plans ‘talking to each other’ or new plans built on existing plans. Interviews, for example, revealed that NRM planners had incorporated outputs and science from other regional statutory plans (e.g. coastal, vegetation management and water allocation). Other regions such as the Wet Tropics reported major benefits from applying biodiversity research from the FNQNRM Plan in developing the WETMA Conservation Strategy.

Regional development plans and growth management frameworks, where present, were also considered as important base documents for some regional NRM plans. Other existing strategies such as regional water quality management, integrated catchment management and earlier regional NRM strategies also provided important foundation documents for the development of the current regional NRM plans. In the Torres Strait region, local government planning, the National Oceans Office Northern Planning Area process and the Australia–PNG Treaty were also seen as vital.

The persistence of a ‘one way’ view of ensuring **consistency** of NRM plans with government policy and planning was common. Although the need for consistency is an obvious one, the at times overzealous focus on consistency alone, limited exploring the potential benefits of broader cooperation of NRM activities. Interviews revealed though that government agency staff in regions generally considered it desirable and necessary that, over time, regional NRM plans and regional body processes would “have to be allowed to influence statutory planning”. But, that this is dependent on changing perceptions of **‘legitimacy’** of regional NRM planning in the eyes of local and state governments.

Should NRM plans default to statutory objectives or ‘raise the bar’?

As they stand, most statutory plans were limited in providing direct guidance on target setting at the regional level for NRM plans. In most cases, translating the objectives of these plans into regional NRM plans required much effort from agency and regional body staff. Some NRM plans directly adopted or ‘defaulted’ to statutory objectives while others tried to add value or raise the bar on those objectives, depending on the regional bodies’ desired approach and advice received from relevant state agencies. Several regional body respondents indicated that objectives from regional pest management plans and regional ecosystem management requirements under the previous draft regional vegetation plans were most effectively transferred to the NRM plan context.

Regional bodies supported the role of statutory planning, and government backing to achieve NRM targets

Alignment of effort and complimentary roles

By mid-late 2004, ‘alignment of effort’, rather than ‘in-kind support’ or ‘integration’ was the language used in some RCG forums to describe the purpose of stakeholder relationships in regional arrangements (see also *S3 Roles and responsibilities* and *S2 Aligned institutions*). This reflected growing support for a more useful exchange between agencies and between agencies and regional groups aimed at addressing common and clearly defined priority issues. Regional body informants generally supported the role of statutory planning, and government backing to achieve the targets in regional NRM plans. This was consistent with some (but not all) regional agency views that “the responsibility for implementation is beyond just the NRM board”. Views on what this co-responsibility might look like in practical terms were often keenly debated.

There was strong agreement among RCG and regional body interviewees that for regional alignment to occur effectively, there needed to be a parallel effort by both state and Australian governments to

address the coordination and integration of their own planning activities for natural resources and the environment. One common example given was **reducing the effects of planning ‘silos’** on property level delivery of NRM objectives.

Emerging management partnerships

Interviewees gave several examples where integrated outcomes were being achieved through management partnerships in monitoring, property scale planning and engagement practices. These partnerships reflect a common view expressed by regional bodies and regional agency staff that management **“needed to come together at the landscape level”**.

Monitoring and reporting

There was considerable evidence that the NRM planning process was catalysing **alignment of research and development organisations** with regional management needs and improving connectivity between regional scale **monitoring and reporting frameworks**— and between state, regional and property scale frameworks. This occurred in part through consideration of *State of the Region* reporting initiatives in linking with *State of Environment* reporting. There was also growing support for monitoring systems to ‘provide benefits both ways’—that is from state to local and vice versa. There were, however, ongoing concerns from interviewees over the apparent disconnection between the State Government’s and regional bodies’ investment in science and monitoring activities.

Property scale planning

Collaboration on property planning and industry reform

Regional bodies were acutely aware that opportunities existed for linking devolved grant or incentive-based landscape scale programs they administered, with existing state government property scale planning initiatives or requirements. There were several cases of co-investment, service provider relationships and general collaboration between agencies, regional bodies and rural industry stakeholder groups to deliver on-ground property management planning. By December 2004, several regional groups were stating that so much of their regional investment strategies were “tied up with property and district scale planning” that a pressing need existed to ‘line up’ regional body investment with adjustment packages administered by government or peak industry groups. Examples were sugar industry reform packages, vegetation management structural adjustment and initiatives such as the Queensland Farmers’ Federation *Farm Management Systems* framework¹². Some interviewees expressed concerns over potential risks if these activities failed to align.

Engagement practices

Observations and interviewees indicated that the regional NRM process was a catalyst for improved **community engagement principles and practice** in government statutory planning. This occurred at several levels including regional bodies working with statutory planners to support the selection of several Community Reference Panels and the design of information sessions for mediating water-planning issues in regions¹³. Regional NRM bodies also provided agencies and other parties access to their management boards, stakeholder engagement networks and information sharing processes. The regional NRM planning process was also exploring and initiating more appropriate interaction with Traditional Owners and industry sectors. As one RCG member put it plainly:

..the biggest impact [of the regional NRM process] to date, and likely impacts, is that the regional bodies and regional plans will influence the way we [state government] undertake the business of planning—that is better processes that are more inclusive and consultative.

Regional NRM bodies also believed they could reinforce community feedback into statutory planning at higher decision-making levels or through submissions and critique of statutory planning processes.

12 A MoU recently signed 31st March 2005 between Queensland Farmers’ Federation and Qld Government on progressing cooperation on industry based FMS programs.

13 A possible role for Desert Channels Queensland, in the Cooper & Georgina-Diamantina, and, Northern and Southern Gulf regions for the Mitchell and Southern Gulf Water Resource Plans. There is a precedent here in Fitzroy and Burdekin regions doing this at various points between 1996 and 2003. Consultation processes established for developing the regional NRM plan were also reported to help ‘ease’ NR&M’s entry into the Northern Gulf region on the Leasehold Land Review Strategy consultation process. In mid-2004, EPA also flagged their interest in using the outputs from regional NRM planning consultation processes to progress regional coastal management plans.

Most interviewees recognised the potential gains from a more effective engagement process on NRM issues in regions. They also noted a need to manage the potential risk of confusing the wider community about NRM roles and responsibilities of different organisations.

Perceived drivers and constraints for integration

Drivers for 'integrated approaches'

Respondents identified common drivers for planning integration as including:

- A planning system regarded as messy and complex by agencies, regional planners and landholders, largely due to the number of NRM policy agenda being progressed.
- **Program requirements** to ensure regional NRM plans are **consistent** with government planning.
- The **role for regional bodies** to support regional coordination and mitigate impacts of the 'messy system'.
- The presence of a shared and defined **management priority**.
- Discrete **drivers** external to the region, such as the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan.

Major **constraints** in linking regional NRM planning with other planning activities included:

- Access to draft statutory plans being restricted (e.g. previously, the draft regional vegetation management plans).
- Incompatible timeframes to deliver NRM planning processes and outcomes (e.g. targets outlined in the Reef Plan, for example, could be integrated in regions yet to start negotiations on target setting, but posed problems for regional bodies who had already completed this process (see also *P3 Procedural fairness*).
- Where earlier or concurrent statutory planning had eroded **trust** among community stakeholders, and consequently willingness to incorporate statutory planning outcomes into the regional NRM process.
- Belief amongst most regional bodies that they were unlikely to influence statutory processes or that it is very **difficult to 'retrofit' community priorities** into statutory plans.
- Few incentives or requirements in the legislation to coordinate.
- Legislative exemptions of major land users from perceived compliance (e.g. mining under the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*).
- Support from government planning staff to look beyond 'core business'.

Linking regional development and natural resource agenda

The potential links between regional development or growth management activities and regional NRM activities was a key area yet to be explored in most regions. The status of these links and opportunities to progress cooperation between these agenda, at several scales, were identified through the evaluation process, with some examples discussed below.

A review of regional NRM plans highlighted that many of the proposed NRM solutions in those plans reflected an appreciation of the **social and economic development drivers** and benefits from natural resource management in a given region. Plans also recognised the need for proposed NRM solutions to be realistic and support the capacity needs of regional communities. In this sense there was considerable 'common ground' for exploring stronger alliances between regional development and NRM planning.

The ability to align with or coordinate with **local government planning** varied greatly between regions and between local governments in some regions. Familiarity with local government planning schemes and the contribution of those schemes was low or unclear in most regions, as were opportunities for regional NRM planners to influence development decisions. In part this seemed tied to the assumption that planning schemes were the primary point of interaction between local governments and regional NRM bodies. Even so, there were important exceptions. Torres Strait regional NRM body were looking to progress NRM issues identified in **local community development plans**. In FNQRNM, the

development of feral animal management plans was providing an avenue for Hinchinbrook Shire Council to participate in the FNQROC.

There was a general view among regional bodies and agency respondents that regional plans (under the Integrated Planning Act in Queensland) could complement NRM planning or provide a broader regional framework to help deliver on regional NRM priorities. Respondents saw a process of ongoing negotiation between those two activities and in general there was a good working relationship between ROCs and regional NRM bodies for this to occur. What was less well recognised was the importance of local government corporate plans in addition to IPA planning schemes to deliver NRM outcomes.

Problem solving on regional development proposals

In SEQ, the context differs to other parts of Queensland. An agency respondent offered an example of potential collaboration between the emerging SEQ regional plan and natural resource planners, where specific **regional development proposals** were likely to generate significant NRM issues (e.g. the Western Bypass). In this scenario regional NRM planners and departments such as Main Roads could be ‘brought into the tent’ to explore mitigation or management options for those development proposals at the regional scale.

Co-investing in regional planning ‘infrastructure’

Beyond cooperation on discrete development issues or proposals, as in the preceding example, there was also considerable scope for regional planning activities to more broadly co-invest in planning structures and processes. Under the Northern Territory Government’s *Building Stronger Regions—Stronger Futures* program there was considerable investment in regional development boards, establishing state-of-the-region reporting frameworks and ‘regional’ capacity building, including encouragement for local councils to amalgamate and so improve efficiencies through regional scale service delivery. The Integrated NRM Plan for the Northern Territory, even more so than many Queensland regional NRM plans, recognised the importance of connecting social and economic development aspirations of local communities to cultural and resource management activities. Given this, and the fact that there are key stakeholder groups involved in both processes (e.g. Aboriginal Land Councils), there is considerable scope to align management and monitoring needs. This could occur *within* the broader regional development planning frameworks or at least define complementary roles or seek efficiencies and more integrated outcomes through sharing parts of the same regional planning infrastructure.

O1 Improved social capital of planners, managers and participants

'Outcomes associated with enhanced individual capabilities, credibility, on-going learning, networks for management and planning and ownership.'

Development of a regional body

Almost all regional body and RCG respondents stated that the creation of new regional bodies and the re-engineering of existing regional groups was the major achievement to date. Many, but not all, respondents believed that regions had built good organisations committed to the process, consisting of people willing to get on and do the job. Dimensions of this achievement included the boards themselves, their skills and business capabilities, staff and stakeholder commitment to the boards. Most regional bodies had a core group of people on boards, and members have developed and matured through a steep learning curve. Regional body respondents identified better corporate governance, better administration and business management, including innovative business approaches as the key outcomes achieved to date. Some of these interviewees made the point that their boards had become strong and permanent groups with a degree of stability that was not dependent on key individuals as initially many regions were.

Increasing credibility and respect

Many regional plans reviewed and regional body members interviewed highlighted that, from a regional body perspective, the most important achievement was gaining respect and credibility in their communities. In the short term, this community support would continue provided there was some NRM delivery that achieved tangible outcomes. This was deemed especially important from respondents from regions whose regional bodies were new on the scene—for example in Southern Gulf Catchments. In the longer term, many government and regional body respondents identified the need for Australian and state government to let go some of their control over the NRM agenda and trust regional bodies to provide directions and even influence government policies and agenda. Unfortunately past experience in vegetation and water planning in some regions has led to mistrust of government agencies and consultation processes among community stakeholders. This history has created a hurdle for the regional NRM process to achieve immediate and long-term goals but also created opportunities for regional bodies to capitalise on the community character of the new boards.

Capacity enhancement

The capacity of many individuals, organisations and agencies was enhanced as a result of the process to date, especially the boards and their staff. Statements in plans and respondents interviewed suggested that people were aware of NRM and had a greater understanding of the region and what role they played in it. This ranged from improved public awareness and understanding about NRM issues through to individuals and groups gaining specific skills and abilities to implement actions on the ground. Some regions started from a very low base in this regard.

Pastoralists saw value in regional bodies' support for addressing statutory requirements for pest management

Although plans reviewed highlighted the difficulty faced by regional bodies to obtain detailed information about the nature and level of relevant expertise in the region, respondents from several regions noted that the regional NRM process had brought more skills and knowledge into the region, and made better use of existing information. The general consensus was that social networks that were built improved both stakeholder and regional body capacity to understand the regional issues and focus their activities to address them. Stakeholders in pastoral regions were particularly conscious of the connection between statutory requirements for pest and weed management, and, the link between regional bodies and landholders in responding to these requirements. There was however ambivalence in regional bodies and agencies about regional bodies expanding in this area.

A fair process is a key factor in the long-term success of regional arrangements

A **fair and transparent process** to enable stakeholders to provide alternative views and knowledge to discuss difficult NRM issues was identified in regional plans and by regional bodies as a **key factor in the long-term success of regional arrangements**. One of the main benefits identified from the priority setting process, for example, was that it provided an excellent opportunity for stakeholders to test assumptions and develop shared understanding. As some informants noted, community involvement and genuine agreement on setting targets (e.g. ground cover) would have been unimaginable five years ago. Parties on the boards were openly debating NRM concerns and directions, and stakeholder groups

that were historically antagonistic to each other were willing to discuss issues, compare management aspirations and agree on common directions.

Stress and burnout

High human transaction costs of NRM program delivery in regions

Regional NRM has come at considerable human transaction and social costs. These costs were incurred during the start-up and planning process and were a serious negative 'outcome' reported by respondents. Personal and organisational stress, fatigue and burnout stemmed from regional body staff trying to develop new group structures and business models while continuing to deliver on current projects and progress the plan development and stakeholder engagement processes. Adding to this burnout was the perception that changing government expectations and program requirements meant the 'goal posts' were constantly shifting. The planning process used up considerable 'credits' with regional communities and created the need for regional bodies to demonstrate outcomes so to 'repay' that involvement.

O2 Effective and connected institutions

'Connectivity between state, regional, sub-regional and local activities and effective and connected processes and structures at the regional scale.'

Participation and interactions

Regional NRM plans and regional body informants noted that improved participation of stakeholders, particularly those not previously engaged with the NRM process such as industry and local government was a key outcome achieved to date. In RCG forums, regional bodies reported that effective networks were now established between stakeholder groups and also between stakeholder groups and government. This improved industry and sector based partnerships and agreements on industry-relevant targets, policies and practices and clarified roles and expectations for NRM delivery and investment.

Alternative approaches to improve Indigenous engagement resulted in some successful outcomes

Although Indigenous participation in regional NRM processes was considered minimal in many regions at the outset of the process, a gradual improvement in Indigenous involvement throughout 2004 is evident through observations of RCG forums and by interviewees. Whether this is sustainable is another matter. There remained uncertainty about the scope of Indigenous natural and cultural resources due in part to the cultural impossibility of separating nature and culture in Indigenous communities. There was also a misfit between government rhetoric on the importance of Indigenous engagement and the limitations inherent in the 'mainstream' planning process and policy frameworks guiding that process (see *S1 Coherent policy and governance structures* and *P2 Capacity to participate*). In some regions, substantial efforts to try alternative approaches to improve Indigenous engagement resulted in successful outcomes.

Local government engagement in the NRM process varied. Many regional body respondents noted there was little local government engagement and even hostility at the outset from some local governments. Even so, local government councillors made significant contributions to many boards, there were several cases of regional cooperation by local governments on NRM issues, and, steps were made to explore formally linking regional NRM plans to regional growth management frameworks in several regions (see also *S2 Aligned institutions* and *P5 Linking scales and activities*).

Plan and strategy outcomes

Despite the negative connotation often given to 'just more planning', many respondents believed that the preparation of their regional plan and investment strategy were significant outcomes. For many regional body respondents these activities dominated their time over the past year or more.

Improved strategic focus of NRM plans and clarity of desired outcomes sought

Virtually all respondents commented favourably on the strategic focus they were required to adopt to develop the plans. They believed the most recent period of planning activity was an improvement on earlier approaches which tended to either spread resources and efforts too thinly or be dominated by single issues. The new regional arrangements encouraged regional bodies to consider multiple issues and perspectives and ask critical questions about what sort of results they wanted from investments. Some particular planning related outcomes identified included:

Delivery of good technical studies to consolidate and build on existing information

Some evidence that regional planning activities and state agency priorities were becoming more aligned (e.g. the work connected to the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan and AGSIP).

Cross-regional or cross-jurisdictional agreements to share responsibilities and financial resources (e.g. DCQ and broader Lake Eyre Basin management; Torres Strait and Cape York on custodial management roles; and Gulf regions and the Northern Territory on marine management responsibilities).

There was also a strengthening and formalising of planning and implementation roles with sub-regional and catchment scale NRM activities in several large regions. A number of regions believed that their sub-regional barriers to cooperation (e.g. Burnett-Mary between coastal and inland) were lessened through the regional process.

Government process and coordination in regions

Improved state agency coordination at the regional scale through RCGs

Many respondents noted improved outcomes relating to State government operation in regions, despite some early discontent. In particular, respondents from agencies and regional bodies saw the emergence of the RCGs as leading to improved coordination of activities of government. Observations of RCG forums and interview analysis revealed that the RCGs could generally be said to have:

- Coordinated (to varying degrees) program delivery at the regional scale, including several major funding rounds.
- Provided a forum for agency-regional body interaction on policy, program and planning business (this improved markedly over time).
- Provided advice from within and across state government agencies—and to a lesser degree from the Australian Government.
- Supported regional NRM bodies to establish their boards, governance arrangements and work through designation requirements (largely a mutual learning and negotiated process between agencies and regional bodies).
- Provided technical and policy-based support and advice for NRM plan development and accreditation (often a major source of conflict and generally more highly valued by the late-starting regional bodies).

There were also cases reported where agencies recognised that the ‘leading’ regional bodies had effectively co-developed policies on regional planning delivery with government.

Both regional body and RCG respondents generally expressed positive views about the current **contribution of RCGs** and noted how these forums encouraged a whole-of-government approach to regional arrangements. Opinions of both board and agency respondents varied as to how much shift there had been in agency programs as a consequence. Respondents’ views ranged from those that didn’t think that the planning process had impacted on core business of agencies such as NR&M, through to those who did. The latter believed it had impacted on the way governments *did* their business, particularly being more inclusive and thinking of engaging communities when starting a new process.

Some other positive outcomes, in this respect included:

- Regional NRM planning process had ‘forced’ agencies to take stock of their NRM information and consider it in the context of community and industry knowledge to compliment that information and fill information gaps.
- Encouraged stakeholders to develop NRM approaches on issues of mutual concern, including those that needed to be managed across tenures (e.g. fire, weeds and feral animals) and across regional planning boundaries (e.g. custodial Traditional Owner management).

Contribution from individual state agencies to regional arrangements has been varied

The contribution from individual state agencies to regional arrangements was varied (see also *C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment*, *S2 Aligned institutions*, and *S7 Structures for integrating knowledge*). In some cases, the same agency provided different levels of input or support in different regions. The EPA presented the greatest discrepancy in both political support for, and access to technical support in regions, playing a central role in some and absent or uncooperative in others. Some EPA respondents believed that the regional arrangements process was demanding in terms of time and resources but did recognise the value of the approach in building skills of regional people and board members. There was a general belief that DPI&F, although making a slow start in many regions was now making a significant contribution through the RCGs and in co-investing in better management practices and associated research, development and extension through the Queensland State-wide investment projects. DLGPSR respondents noted that the involvement of local governments to incorporate the NRM agenda was not considered to be a high priority at present but recognised that councils would need to align with accredited plans and be more involved in the next phase. There was also a diversity of experience amongst interview respondents on the degree to which NR&M’s involvement in regional arrangements had actually changed that agency’s mode or focus of operation.

Poor continuity of support and lack of role clarity has impacted catchment Landcare and Bushcare groups

There were some negative comments made about the level of coherence between the different levels of planning. Many respondents commented on the lack of clarity and inefficiency in establishing the regional scale approach. There were also reports that existing arrangements with ICM, Landcare and Bushcare groups had suffered significantly from poor continuity of support and lack of clarity of their role in the new regional arrangements. In part this was ascribed to inter-governmental conflict and lack of direction on this issue and conflict resulting from ‘power struggles’ between key stakeholders. Further, some regions were dislocated due to regional boundary definitions that split communities of interest in regions or split historic funding linkages between regional and local activity.

Delivery mechanisms

The majority of respondents believed that much had been achieved by regional bodies in a complex situation and under pressure in a short time. There was considerable satisfaction, and recognition of an important achievement, in that the regional process, boards and plans exist, and were now in place to deliver what was intended. Even so, respondents made some criticisms. There was a widespread view that many of the **management actions and targets** focused on further investigation, feasibility studies and research and monitoring, rather than delivering outcomes on the ground (see *S6 Monitoring return on investment*). Many government agency respondents were also less satisfied with the outcomes to date but did identify some positive results including the increased public focus on natural resource problems and improved arrangements between government and the community to address these. There was also recognition from many respondents and evident within the new regional plans, of significant improvements in:

- Implementation models for property management planning or improving the uptake of sustainable management practices through incentives.
- Implementation contracts negotiated between states and regional groups.
- Working knowledge of, and commitment to, developing monitoring frameworks that align with, and inform, state and national level frameworks such as State of Environment reporting, and improved application of national indicators at the regional scale.

In the case of the last example, regional bodies often acted as catalysts for a ‘re-thinking’ of cooperative approaches to monitoring frameworks in regions (see also *P5 Linking scales and activities*). However much of this is still in its infancy.

O3 Improved resource condition

'Condition of priority natural, social, cultural and economic resources in regions'

For even the most advanced set of regional arrangements or regional NRM body, it was too early to measure on-ground and resource condition outcomes. The discussion here then is about participants' expectations of improvement rather than actual or measured change.

Expectations on resource condition change

Positive expectations of change in the longer term

Almost all respondents had positive expectations about the likelihood that the regional NRM process would result in improving the region's assets. This was a significant finding and includes both regional body people (who might be expected to be optimistic) and regional agency people.

The majority of more equivocal respondents qualified their answers but had positive expectations. Reservations noted included whether the program could deliver short-term results on the ground, and even if it did whether those changes could be measured. Some respondents were pessimistic that even 10 to 15 years down the track it would be very difficult to judge who or what actions had contributed to the cause of the benefit e.g. the impacts of statutory or voluntary planning and action (see also *S6 Monitoring return on investment*). Many respondents commented that improvements in resource condition would be gradual but there would be measurable changes in 10 to 15 years (consistent with the planning horizons within NRM plans) but certainly not in three years.

Focus on prevention

In the shorter term, there was a common expectation that the regional NRM funded activities would start to stabilise resource condition and/or there would be no further losses in that condition. Improvements would happen through prevention from further degradation rather than improvement per se. Statements made in plans articulated a clear message—regional asset condition could only be improved from large-scale, sustained investment in the long term and changes to stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours.

Impact of external factors on achieving resource outcomes

Respondents were also aware of the potential impact 'external' factors might have on resource condition. For example:

- The complex and increasing impact of population growth e.g. expansion into 'greenfield' development in some regions.
- Markets, commodity prices, regional economic and social change patterns and climate variability.
- Other planning and policy processes having a major effect on resource outcomes, in particular, water allocation planning 'stabilising' the status quo and the phasing out of broad scale tree clearing.

Specific changes expected to occur varied between regions, but the most common expectations included:

- Improved outcomes for **biodiversity**, especially through the protection of urban corridors, landscape fragments, off-reserve conservation strategies and strategic feral animal and weed strategies.
- Improved **water quality** outcomes, riparian and riverine health.

Less positive on salinity and coastal outcomes

On the other hand, respondents were pessimistic about improvements in salinity. They believed that many landowners currently do not recognise the problem and that poses a key barrier to an improvement for the salinity issue.

Respondents were also less hopeful about the likelihood of improving coastal erosion or the sustainability of dugong and turtle populations because these issues required difficult decisions and agreements to be made, often with stakeholders who were external to the regional arrangement process.

Lessons for effective regional arrangements for NRM

The findings of this evaluation point to several factors that directly **support** the development of effective regional arrangements for natural resource management, or, **constrain** that development. These findings drew mainly on the Queensland experience and were common threads that ran through regional bodies' and state agencies' experiences in regions.

Several **unresolved challenges** remain, and if not addressed, will limit the longer-term sustainability, adequacy and effectiveness of integrated NRM outcomes through the regional model.

Supporting factors

Supporting negotiation between regional players

The findings underlined the importance of negotiation as a primary tool for managing competing or conflicting stakeholder aspirations at the regional scale. Negotiation was also critical in allowing stakeholders to explore alternative management, policy or investment options. Board and membership structures of regional NRM bodies and state agency Regional Coordination Group forums were valuable in providing an arena for that formal negotiation, including negotiation between state government agencies. The approach adopted for target setting and priority-setting processes for regional NRM plan development provided an equally valuable negotiating opportunity in most regions.

A practical focus for shared effort

Resource management partnerships for monitoring, engagement and for property-scale and sub-regional implementation of sustainable land management practices emerged in most regions. These partnerships were between industries, regional bodies and state agencies, and were driven in part by a common view expressed by regional bodies and regional agency staff that management “needs to come together at the landscape level”. These management partnerships were generally most effective where parties developed specific funding proposals or agreements based on issue, sector, place or a specific shared problem. Recognising stakeholder management aspirations (Indigenous or rural industry), or responsibilities under statutes (State and Local governments) proved fundamental i.e. recognising and working with ‘self-interest’.

Providing alternative pathways

A primary function of regional bodies was to provide alternative (non-statutory) pathways for engaging stakeholders and providing them with NRM information and resources, and, for land managers, to work towards statutory compliance responsibilities. For example, stakeholders in pastoral regions were particularly conscious of the connection between statutory requirements for pest and weed management and the link between regional bodies and landholders in responding to these requirements. Where statutory planning initiatives defined periods for public ‘consultation’ the regional body structures provided an important ongoing support mechanism for management, incentives, or ‘somewhere to go’ to harness the interest or increased awareness and provide a pathway for action.

Accessing knowledge and skills from inside and outside regions

Drawing on the skills and knowledge of regional stakeholders, especially in low data regions, was critical in ground-truthing available scientific information and improving the management applicability of that information to targets and actions at the local level. Similarly, the ability of regions to access external knowledge brokers such as research institutions or CRCs improved the synthesis and translation of existing resource data to the planning task. These ‘third-party’ players also helped overcome the bureaucratic hurdles often faced by regional NRM bodies in securing data directly from state agencies, particularly in the start-up phase of planning where data sharing agreements or structures were not clearly articulated.

Regions were also quite innovative in developing partnerships to harness skills and support from other regional bodies (acting in a service provider role), agency scientific or technical staff, and regional industry stakeholders. A key example was the emerging role of cross-regional agreements to resource implementation activities in remote regions such as Cape York, the Gulf regions, and Desert Channels.

Value of sub-regional links

In larger regions in particular, strong relationships between regional NRM bodies and sub-regional and catchment scale activities generally supported well-defined implementation and planning roles. In many regions the presence of prior sub-regional organisations resulted in a significant head start by providing critical ‘social infrastructure’ for engagement on NRM plan development and implementation. The success of this arrangement, however, depended on the ability of regional NRM bodies to negotiate these roles with sub-regional groups in a fair way. Pre-existing sub-regional structures in some regions were also found to constrain stakeholders in thinking more ‘regionally’ and in a small number of cases confounded the establishment of an effective regional process.

Place matters

Matching the planning model and role of regional NRM bodies to the character of the region was critical to effective regional arrangements. Place matters in not only the type of problems regional NRM addresses but also dictates to some degree the approach required to address those problems. Regional NRM bodies were also playing a diversity of roles across regions. These roles generally reflected the available ‘space’ in regional NRM service provision driven by the diversity of regional settings, remoteness, access to services, impacts of prior planning, or perceived need for coordination of effort. Different modes of operation and roles are required to fill these different gaps in regional NRM arrangements. An acceptance of this regional diversity and a greater focus on the ends (e.g. achieving NRM outcomes), rather than set means, is required (e.g. compliance with guidelines).

Responding to changing management needs

Given the rapidity of changing policy, program and management requirements, the ability of regional players to respond to these changes is critical. Over the period of the evaluation regional NRM bodies and regional state agency staff via Regional Coordination Groups demonstrated an increasing capability to respond at the regional level. Often this was through self-initiated reviews that addressed representative structures, sectoral agreements, terms of reference or engagement approaches.

Constraining factors

Time available given complexity of the task (or a case of unrealistic expectations)

Regions suffered from severe time constraints. No policy precedents or tested models existed for the new arrangements in northern Australia, and regional body formation and planning dominated the early implementation phase. Government agencies’ enthusiasm to get funding dollars ‘out the door’ strained efforts to implement good negotiation practices, limited co-development and review of NRM proposals and reduced the effectiveness of community stakeholder engagement. At the same time a multitude of guidelines (often prescriptive, untimely and occasionally conflicting) and reporting structures, slowed the process down. Furthermore, it was a common experience that considerable and duplicated effort was required from both statutory and regional body planners to ‘translate’ statutory objectives, even generalised policies into regional NRM plans.

Administration issues consumed a great deal of time that could be used to actually do the work they were mandated to deliver. As a result these time constraints were passed on to stakeholders who were not always patient.

Regional bodies, on the other hand, saw the process as the development of fundamental social infrastructure, with long-term goals fixed on future use and ongoing relationships beyond plan development. In particular, this was critical to achieving sign-up from industry and Indigenous interests so a longer and broader dialogue could be maintained, beyond the short-term imperative of plan development

Narrow perspectives on planning and management integration

Coordination was improving, however an over-zealous focus on consistency alone, limited exploring the potential benefits of broader cooperation of NRM activities. Government agencies find the language of integration generally unhelpful and threatening to their understanding of maintaining their own defined statutory responsibilities. On the other hand, alignment of effort, cooperation and coordination of effort and resources involved improved openness of agency and government priorities and budget resources available in regions.

Program, policy and planning silos

There was strong agreement amongst RCG and regional body interviewees that for regional alignment to occur effectively, their needed to be a parallel effort by territory, state and Australian governments to address the coordination and integration of their own planning activities for resources and environment. One common example was reducing the effects of planning silos on property level delivery of NRM objectives.

Perceived lack of long-term political commitment from governments

Long-term political commitment and regional level operational support is required for large organisations such as state government agencies to genuinely align activities and commit resources. Lack of certainty or clarity about that level of support undermined confidence and commitment within regional bodies and their stakeholders alike.

The program rhetoric correctly acknowledged that this new paradigm could only be fully achieved over time and that some regions could not meet all the program prescriptions in the first round of planning. In practice however, funding bodies expected plans to contain fully developed targets, despite obvious limitations in the knowledge base. This led to some regional plans with a false sense of rigour rather than a commitment to a systematic adaptive management approach over time.

Different tiers of government and departments within tiers were perceived (by regional bodies) to have varying commitment to the regional arrangements. The recent withdrawal of Commonwealth activity from the Regional Coordination Groups placed a question mark on commitment. Similarly, regional bodies perceived a disparity within state departments in terms of commitment and even mixed messages from within the same department. Also, while some departments may use the correct rhetoric, there were doubts over the ability or understanding of commitment to implementation.

Lack of confidence in political commitment to allow planning and implementation to cycle through, together with constantly changing financial commitments even in the short term, constrained strategic planning, investment and partnership building.

In reality, regional bodies, regional institutions and sectors needed a chance to catch up. They were steadily heading in the directions envisioned in the policies and we are beginning to see benefits and cooperation on monitoring and delivery arrangements.

A simple comparison with the 10-year review and planning horizons of statutory NRM plans (such as WRP) provides a useful indication of the resourcing, timeframes and political commitment necessary to successfully implement complex, regional-scale initiatives.

Failure by governments to provide and maintain the necessary political commitment will incur significant costs on regional social capital.

This process could be aided by capturing and sharing lessons for improved management and likely improvements and focus in NRM information, better target setting and monitoring through management practices. This could be compared with the NRM planning in the context of 'normal' statutory planning cycles where there is a case for 10-year review horizon and the political and resourcing implications for agencies and communities

Otherwise the costs to regional social capital from broken commitments will be significant.

Unresolved challenges

Linking and balancing regional development and NRM agendas

Links between NRM activities and regional development planning were still weak, undefined or absent in most regions. At the policy level, there was a need to balance state and regional development agendas and to consider competing interests and trade-offs at the regional scale. At a more practical level there was considerable scope to explore the sharing of monitoring, coordination, engagement and investment frameworks between regional NRM activities and regional growth management or development planning. This would also provide the basis to address many of the broader social and economic aspirations of stakeholders required to effectively implement regional NRM objectives currently limited by program scope. Some regions explored models for this to occur.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions

At present roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions was largely undefined or unclear at best. While there was a common belief that state and national agencies were responsible for long-term resource condition monitoring, coherent programs were not evident. For example, in the two years since the release of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, water quality monitoring programs in reef catchments are still being debated.

Apart from the consequent lack of consistent information to measure resource condition changes and the success of interventions, governments have created cynicism in the regions about their competence on what appears a relatively straightforward technical activity.

Potential coordination of government, community and industry roles in regional monitoring systems is also yet to be resolved, although several regional bodies are seeking to invest specifically in this area.

Improving priority setting

Well-intentioned government and scientific guidance about priority setting substantially underestimated the complexity and difficulty of doing it in practice. In reality, balancing the wide range of NRM issues, program priorities and stakeholder's competing interests resulted in fairly haphazard outcomes. More work is needed to improve decision-making approaches that balance political and accountability needs of the process and which can be used in complex, community-based settings. This includes better approaches for addressing Indigenous management aspirations in the priority setting process.

Apart from better decision-making technology, better strategic guidance would be provided if the state and national governments had coherent NRM strategies and priorities of their own as a framework.

Strengthening commitment from local government

Local government engagement in the regional NRM process was patchy at best. Given the essential role that local governments play in local NRM and in community and development politics at regional level, finding ways to strengthen its involvement is needed to ensure the long-term success of the devolved regional partnership model. Important steps in doing this involves addressing local government concerns over unfair devolution of NRM responsibilities refocusing on operational benefits from partnering regional bodies, particularly in more remote regions.

Engaging tourism, defence and urban stakeholders

The evaluation clearly points to the absence of important 'sectors' or stakeholders from regional planning and management arrangements for natural resources. Even when the pressures and benefits of tourism use were recognised, the tourism sector's voice was difficult to identify and was repeatedly referred to as an external pressure on the resource base. Another major land manager and investor absent from the regional NRM process was the Department of Defence. The role of urban communities, as resource users and consumers, was often undervalued with NRM seen predominantly as a rural problem.

Future directions and focus for Stage 2

This benchmark report presented findings from the Tropical Savannas CRC Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project for progress until early 2005. The project team will continue to work with our partners to track progress through to mid-2006 and build on this first benchmark report.

The regional NRM process is evolving from the formation and planning phases into the implementation and monitoring phases. The project will continue to monitor and report on regional arrangements and activities in this next phase. It will track and report on how the regional process and plans evolve. Can the difficulties be overcome? Are the expectations realised? What new challenges emerge?

In the next phase (2005–06), the scope of the project will expand to include other regional planning activities, (i.e. in addition to regional NRM bodies), and to engage with a broader range of industry, community and government players.

In 2004, Queensland NRM regions were at a relatively more advanced stage than in other parts of the savannas. Therefore this report largely focused on the Queensland experience. This situation has now changed and in 2005–06, benchmarking in NT and WA can be conducted more explicitly.

The research design and techniques will also evolve in 2005–06. While we will retain the theoretical strength and consistency of our framework of criteria, these will be revised in the light of experience in the first application.

This first round benchmarking was intentionally open-ended and qualitative to gain responses unbiased by narrow pre-coded questionnaire techniques. To measure change in the issues we have now benchmarked, the research can be more directed and more focused. This will occur in several ways:

- Repeated survey of regional body and regional agency staff using more structured questionnaires and less intensive interview techniques.
- Conduct of in-depth analysis of case studies of cross regional themes in both regional arrangements and regional planning. These case studies will involve regions from all three savanna jurisdictions. Indicative topics for these may include:
 - The links between NRM and regional development planning.
 - Adaptive management of water quality.
 - Local government engagement.
 - Industry engagement and roles.
 - Issues and options for the Australian Defence Force involvement in regional NRM.
 - Indigenous participation in NRM monitoring and evaluation.
 - Characteristics of ‘learning’ regions.
 - Impact, influence and lessons from applying evaluation frameworks for regional arrangements.
 - Biodiversity information in regional scale planning.

The second round of plan reviews will also focus on the regional investment strategies and how well they translate the actions and targets in the plans and the effectiveness of their implementation. New techniques will be created to do this including more quantitative measures of expenditure decisions and outputs.

Appendix 1:

Major milestones in NRM and environmental policy and practice in Queensland context

1960s

- 1967—major erosion events in south-east Qld (Gold Coast).
- Beach Protection Authority established to address building on foreshores, focus on beach erosion and dune management.

1970s

- 1975—Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority established.
- Coastal management planning, studies and action on the open coasts.

1980s

- mid-80s—The “Potter farms” in Victoria under the Foundation’s Farmland Plan.
- Emergence of the Landcare ethic, National Soil Conservation Program begun.
- 1988—Landcare Council established in Queensland.
- 1989—Australia’s Injured Coast report released.
- 1989—Bob Hawke announced ‘Decade of Landcare’.

1990s

- Early 90s—‘integrated catchment management’ initiative promoted in Queensland and first regional framework for growth management undertaken in South-east Queensland.
- 1993—Resource Assessment Commission’s Coastal Zone Inquiry investigated coastal management in Australia.
- 1993—Conservationists and National Farmers Federation united on land care issues and need for national action.
- 1994—COAG water reform introduced.
- 1995—dedicated coastal management and protection legislation begun in Queensland.
- 1996—Queensland joined the Murray Darling Basin Commission.
- 1996—Coastcare, Coast and Cleans Seas initiatives begun in Queensland.
- 1997—sale of Telstra and funding by Commonwealth government of NHT program: Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare and Coastcare.
- 1998—Northern Territory established the Landcare Council of the NT.
- 1999—Commonwealth released the ‘Blue Book’ on managing natural resources in rural Australia and Queensland introduced legislation to manage vegetation.

2000 onwards

- 2000—National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality announced by Commonwealth Government. Queensland Government was first to sign inter-governmental agreement.
- 2000—legislation introduced in Queensland to manage water resources.
- 2001—Regional arrangements concept and principles emerged in Queensland.
- 2001—Queensland’s first State Coastal Plan was approved: provided the framework state-wide for coastal management.

- 2002—Discussion paper on regional arrangements in NRM planning developed in Queensland which identified key principles.
- 2003—Reef Water Quality Protection Plan signed between the Queensland and Commonwealth governments and three regional coastal plans approved for Curtis Coast, Cardwell–Hinchinbrook and Wet Tropics.