

# **Evaluation of Regional Planning Arrangements for Natural Resource Management 2005– 06: Benchmark Report II**

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Milestone Report 4  
Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project  
Tropical Savannas Management CRC**



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## Abbreviations and acronyms

CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
DCQ	Desert Channels Queensland, Inc
DNRMW	Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, Queensland
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland Government
FNQNRM	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management, Ltd
GBR	Great Barrier Reef
GLM	Grazing Land Management
JSC	Joint Steering Committee
LCNT	Landcare Council of the Northern Territory
MER	Monitoring Evaluation and Reporting
NAP	National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NRMB	Natural Resource Management Board, Northern Territory
NT	Northern Territory
QLD	Queensland
QMDC	Queensland Murray Darling Committee
RCGs	Regional Coordination Groups (of Qld Government agencies)
RGMFs	Regional Growth Management Frameworks
RIS	Regional Investment Strategy
RPAC	Regional Planning Advisory Committee (for Regional IPA Planning)
RWQPP	Reef Water Quality Protection Plan
SEQ	South East Queensland
SEQWC	South East Queensland—Western Catchments
SMART	Simple, Measurable, Accessible, Relevant and Time-bound
SWNRM	South West Natural Resource Management
TS-CRC	Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre
WA	Western Australia
WRP	Water Resource Planning

# Executive summary

## Evaluating regional NRM in northern Australia

The Healthy Savanna Planning Systems project is a three-year research based evaluation of regional NRM planning initiatives in the tropical savannas of northern Australia. The aim of the project is to:

*Provide an objective appraisal of progress and constraints to regional NRM in northern Australia, using lessons from the current experience to inform future planning practice, NRM policy and program design.*

The evaluation scope includes seventeen NRM regions and sub-regions in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Regions in south-eastern and south-western Queensland are also included in the scope of the evaluation through partnership funding from the Department of Natural Resources Mines & Water (Qld).

This report is the second *Benchmark Report* of regional planning arrangements prepared by the research team. Findings in this report reflect the status of regional arrangements for natural resource management (NRM) in late 2005-early 2006. This report presents:

- i) The framework used to evaluate regional NRM planning activity in these regions;
- ii) Key findings from the second phase the evaluation; and,
- iii) Proposed directions to improve the viability of the regional model in northern Australia.

The evaluation is based on a key informant survey of 57 regional body and government agency staff conducted in late 2005. Responses were analysed against nineteen criteria developed in this project to evaluate regional planning arrangements. These criteria report on the status and trend of factors such as new partnerships, alignment of NRM institutions, knowledge integration, roles and responsibilities, and outcomes from the regional approach to date. Eight issue-based case studies in regional NRM were also undertaken and include strategies to improve pastoral partnerships; target setting for water quality; Indigenous and remote engagement and explore success factors for science in regions amongst others<sup>1</sup>.

## Background to findings

Current major funding programs that support regional approaches to NRM in Australia - the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) - have several core expectations. These expectations include that planning and investment processes will be inclusive of all interests and stakeholders in regions, and will use the best available science to assess the condition of regional assets and set targets to improve these assets. In addition, a central assertion of the regional approach is that it decentralises decision-making to enhance the effectiveness of partnerships and actions at regional and local levels. These regional arrangements for NRM include regional NRM bodies, government, community and industry resource users and managers, their activities, and the relationships between them. Regional NRM arrangements have evolved at different rates across regions and jurisdictions in northern Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> McDonald et al, 2006 *Case studies in regional NRM in northern Australia, July 2006 (in preparation)*.

This evaluation highlights that most regions were in a period of transition between planning and early implementation activities in late 2005. Governance and organisational arrangements, including regional body structures, were also changing in response to new implementation needs.

### **Strengths of the regional approach**

Strengths of the regional model are core functions of the regional bodies' day to day operations. These functions include 1) **involving local stakeholders in investment design** and project delivery, 2) **brokering new partnerships and co-investment**, and 3) improving NRM delivery through an **adaptive management** approach of capturing and sharing experiences within and between regions.

The **non-statutory status of regional NRM bodies** in northern Australia supports these kinds of strengths. This community-based status has helped regional bodies respond to changing stakeholder and investor needs and match their approach to their unique regional settings. It has also helped regional bodies maintain a sometime difficult balance between delivering government business and retaining community identity. In turn, this allows regional bodies to operate effectively as independent brokers of partnerships and co-investment and **negotiating collaborative solutions in regions**. There is evidence that indicates regional bodies are becoming more effective at negotiating partnerships and co-investments over time. These partnerships and co-investments are most effective when issue-based or place-based in nature. The effectiveness of these partnerships in Queensland's regions is also due to a comparatively more diversified and devolved approach adopted. Within that jurisdiction, collaboration processes have developed at more relevant scales, socially, and ecologically. This has created strong 'local' ownership of the regional level process. In this setting, regional bodies' commitment is to their communities rather than pre-defined statutory obligations.

This **success was not evenly shared across all regions**. In larger regions with limited funds, transaction costs of involvement for some prospective partners or stakeholders often rivalled likely benefits. This issue is best illustrated by looking at a counter-case. The Ord River Catchment as a NAP region has a more defined planning area, tighter scope, and an established NRM planning network in the Ord Land and Water initiative, bolstered by close geographical association with local science and extension personnel. As a consequence the Ord has exerted greater local control in their regional investment and project development phases. In turn this has helped maintain momentum of activity and ability of the regional body to leverage significant government agency and industry buy-in.

**Sub-regional networks were widely reported by regional bodies as essential** for supporting uptake of sustainable management practices and effective engagement outcomes. Connections to local and subregional land management networks, however, were less effective where jurisdictional arrangements favoured centralisation of the planning and engagement process such as in the Northern Territory. Other factors hindering progress on establishing good engagement networks included historical legacies of difficult or underdeveloped relationships with sub-regions (e.g. the Burdekin and Desert Channels regions) or where the future support of engagement networks developed at the subregional level were uncertain (e.g. Kimberley subregion).

Regional bodies are, in general terms, highly **successful in their role as coordinators of regional activity**. This role is more effective however when operational responsibility for coordination is shared with multi-agency forums such as *Regional Coordination Groups* in Queensland.

Moving towards a system of joint-responsibility for coordination is essential in addressing some of the tougher coordination issues – such as developing effective monitoring and information systems – that rely heavily on gaining broader cross-government cooperation.

### **Limitations of the regional approach**

The slow development of **regional information systems** was a major constraint identified in the first phase of the evaluation, which noted that in late 2004 - early 2005 “roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions were largely undefined or unclear at best” (McDonald et al 2005b, p.9). Some eighteen months later, and with actions underway in regions, **systems are not yet in place to monitor the effectiveness of actions** aimed at improving resource condition.

In addition regional bodies consistently report difficulties in securing the required skills, staff and the baseline data necessary to make real progress on this front. **Data sharing arrangements** are in operation in a small number of regions, however, most regions reported that there had been considerable debate but little progress or action on this front. In essence, clarity on *what to monitor and where, who manages the monitoring infrastructure and data, and who pays for it* is still a significant and unresolved issue at program, jurisdictional and regional levels. In light of this, the expectation that regional bodies will deliver “quick results” and report these in rapid fashion to investors is unrealistic. Regional body capacity in this arena is currently hamstrung by the lack of progress by resource management institutions (agencies) and data custodians whose primary roles are aligned with resource assessment and monitoring responsibilities.

In contrast to the core strengths identified, the limiting aspects of the regional model relate to more complex, multi-partner negotiations and structures where responsibilities often merge, and the needs of different parties overlap or conflict. Strong perceptions exist amongst government and regional bodies that **clarity on roles and responsibilities** for implementation and monitoring are still unclear to many regional participants and require improved definition.

Given the success of new partnerships in regions it was somewhat surprising that regional planners and managers view **alignment of NRM priorities** between community, government and industry as poor. The evaluation suggests however that this has not prevented collective action in regions. In fact, a shared interest or stake in the management of a particular *asset, place or issue* is more important than parties sharing the same priorities, as these priorities reflect the parties’ core, and often competing values. The increasing use of the mantra “alignment of effort” in regions is indicative of a strategy that allows progress without necessitating shared priorities.

**Capacity** of different stakeholders **to participate** is still highly variable in and between regions. In large regions with dispersed populations, planners believe it is harder to engage effectively. In regions such as the WA Rangelands and Southern Gulf, resources available to planners are **insufficient for meaningful participation** of even some key stakeholders. More generally, local government involvement is improving but still considered to be “patchy” and yet to translate into operational commitments in many regions. Finding the right scale or mechanism to engage groups of local governments is a common challenge for regional bodies. Mining and tourism sectors, as major income generators, are largely absent from the regional NRM table. The involvement of managers of the large conservation estate in the north is limited at best.

## **Directions for a viable regional NRM in northern Australia**

Northern and tropical savanna regions are characterised by expansive areas with dispersed populations, highly variable landscapes and climate, and multiple interests and values in natural resources. In this setting the development of effective regional planning arrangements and institutions is a challenge for governments and communities alike. The evaluation suggests three core needs must be met if the regional model is to remain viable in northern regions of Australia, and more specifically, if natural resource managers and their actions are to be effective. These core needs are: sustainable livelihood aspirations; cost effective actions and monitoring systems; and appropriate scale and scope for NRM.

### **1. Recognise and incorporate stakeholders' aspirations for sustainable livelihoods in the design and delivery of natural resource management programs**

A key factor influencing effective regional NRM in the north is the diversity of economic, social and cultural values that permeate resource use and management decisions. The current program arrangements for NAP and NHT restrict regional bodies' ability to adequately integrate and reflect these values in targets and actions. Stakeholders in savanna regions see sustainable livelihoods as fundamental to achieving sustainable landscapes. The key challenge then is to design NRM interventions that address livelihood aspirations and re-affirm northern communities as regional assets, not simply as means to achieve resource condition outcomes. Addressing livelihood aspirations involves designing interventions that achieve multiple outcomes (i.e. economic, social, cultural and environmental). Where engagement and project development processes for regional NRM have adopted this approach, implicitly or otherwise, regional bodies have made good progress. For program designers and policy makers this means linking NRM objectives to broader regional development efforts.

### **2. Increase focus on cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems that inform local learning and regional decisions**

The relationship between management actions and the improvement of resource condition is not well understood and difficult to demonstrate in the short term. This raises a fundamental question about how to define and measure cost-effectiveness of implementation activity in northern regions. In this setting, greater focus on testing the links between actions and outcomes in an adaptive way is needed. Achievement of certain actions may suffice as surrogate measures for achieving outcomes in many instances. Regional bodies are well positioned to increase current efforts to access and use local knowledge and experiences to strengthen action-outcome understanding, and, to inform the selection of indicators and criteria to judge success of interventions. The evaluation team have made recommendations to this effect in a report to the Natural Resource Policies and Programs Committee on science needs for regional NRM, in May 2006.

### **3. Ensure the scale and scope of planning in large northern regions is appropriate**

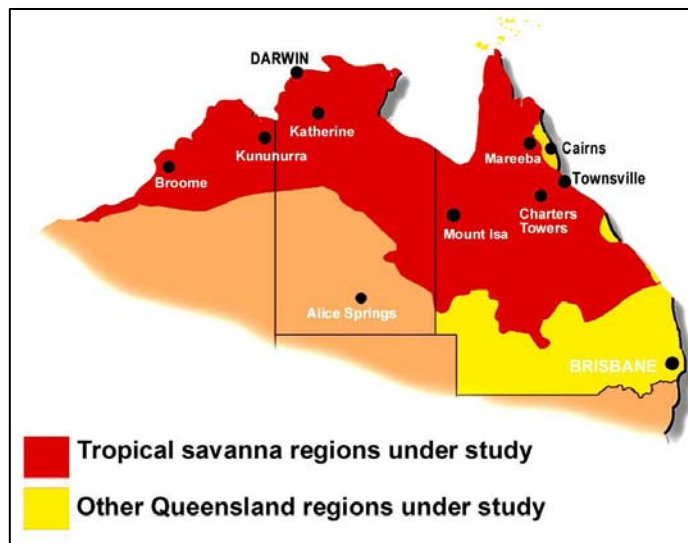
Some regions are too large or too centralised to be effective. That is, some existing planning areas under NAP and NHT do not match appropriate scales for collaboration or stakeholder connection to place or a particular issue. The Northern Territory, WA Rangelands and larger regions of Queensland illustrate this difficulty of making progress without sufficient resources to invest in sub-regional networks and local level support. Adequately resourcing 'sub-regions' so that engagement and implementation networks are viable in the longer term is critical.

The regional approach would also benefit from a focus on fewer targets. Where the scope of regional body activity is focused on solving a few key shared issues - for example weeds or water quality - effectiveness increases. And, if integrated approaches are adopted in addressing these key issues, then benefits to other assets – such as biodiversity or industry viability - can still be realised. Adopting a reduced scope allows momentum to build in implementation and helps identify likely outcomes to participants. Importantly, social capital is build through the exercise of successfully addressing a shared problem. This success then allows more contentious or complex problems to be tackled in the future.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Regional planning in Northern Australia

Tropical savannas constitute some fifteen percent of the Australian continent and are characterised by grassy open woodlands in which fire, monsoonal rains, and extended dry periods predominate (TS-CRC, 2006). Human populations in the savannas are highly mobile, seasonal and dispersed. Figure 1 shows the distribution of tropical savanna landscapes in Australia.



**Figure 1. Northern Australia's tropical savannas**

Ecosystems and landscapes in the north are still relatively intact and natural resources underdeveloped compared to southern temperate Australia. The northern landscapes also exhibit high spatial and temporal variability in productivity and resilience of their ecosystems, largely associated with effects from a highly variable climate. Equally varied are the different values in the landscape, held, for example, by pastoralists, Indigenous people, and the large number of tourists that are increasingly generating substantial economic benefits. There is also increasing interest from national and international communities. At the present time there is also an unprecedented shift from productivist values in savanna regions to increasing recognition and predominance of multiple cultural, spiritual, social, ecological and alternative economic values in these landscapes (Holmes 2000, Whitehead 2002, Ash and Stafford Smith 2003).

Within the tropical savannas, and northern Australia more broadly, economic and social development agendas and policies are still highly prevalent. In part, this agenda is associated with providing housing, education, health and employment opportunities to remote, regional and Indigenous communities, while also maintaining sufficient infrastructure to support the mining, tourism, and pastoral industries and defence land as major economic sectors in the north. Small areas of high value irrigated horticulture and sugar cane production are associated with major water infrastructure in some regions, such as the Burdekin and the Ord River Irrigation Areas. There is considerable pressure in a number of sectors to further exploit these water resources.

Amongst these land uses are large parts of protected areas managed for biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage values. Indigenous traditional owners are major landowners and managers with special rights and obligations under Commonwealth legislation as custodians of large areas of the savannas (e.g. some 30% of the Kimberley region and just under half of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal land).

In tropical savanna regions, as in other parts of Australia, there are a multiplicity of institutions, organisations and stakeholders with an interest or formal role in natural resource planning, management, regulation and monitoring. These include Federal and State/Territory government agencies with responsibility for managing land, water and biodiversity resources, and the statutory bodies for administering the policies of those agencies. Local governments are also beginning to play an ever-increasing role in natural resource management (NRM), particularly in the Queensland and Western Australian contexts. Local, district and catchment based land management and environmental networks have been in operation in these landscapes for close to twenty years.

Regional policy and planning frameworks are now widely considered to provide an optimal scale at which to implement strategic responses to sustainable development and environmental management imperatives. Importantly, the regional turn of governance in Australia reflects a global trend to devolve decision making in an attempt to reflect the aspirations of local communities. Since 2001, the Australian and State/Territory Governments have co-invested in regional scale NRM programs under the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP). These programs seek to address issues such as water quality, biodiversity and salinity through strategic regional investments. Under these programs regional NRM bodies<sup>2</sup> have been formed to develop and implement integrated regional NRM plans and regional investment strategies (RIS). The approach has varied, however, across the Australian jurisdictions. In the 'northern' jurisdictions relevant to this study, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, these regional bodies are non-statutory, community-based organisations. There are some seventeen NRM 'regions' defined within the three jurisdictions (see Figure 2). These planning and investment regions vary considerably in size and the level of funding allocated to address NRM problems in their region.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that hereafter, regional NRM bodies will only be referred to as 'regional bodies'

<sup>3</sup> Regional investment case study by Heyenga in McDonald et al. 2006, Case Study Report.



**Figure 2. Australia's NRM regions**

(Source: DEH 2005)

Key expectations of the NHT and NAP funding programs are that regional NRM planning and investment processes must be inclusive of all relevant interests and stakeholders in their region, and must use the best available science to assess the condition of their regional assets and set targets to protect, restore or stabilise the condition of those assets. In addition, a central assertion of adopting a regional approach is that it decentralises decision-making in order to enhance NRM at the property or local scale and facilitates a more open, participatory and collaborative approach to finding solutions to pressing problems (Lee and Wood 2004). In any region these arrangements for NRM include the range of resource users and managers, planning and management activities, and the links and relationships between them.

The diverse characteristics of northern and savanna regions, the multiplicity of players and program logic and expectations ensures the development of effective regional planning arrangements is a challenge for governments and communities alike. Evaluation in this setting plays an important role in providing an objective appraisal and supporting an adaptive management approach to regional NRM.

## 1.2. Objectives of the Healthy Savanna Planning Systems project

The Healthy Savanna Planning Systems project is a three-year research based evaluation of regional NRM planning initiatives in the tropical savannas of northern Australia. The project forms a major component of the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre's (TS-CRC) regional planning research theme.

The overall project goal is to contribute to effective regional NRM policy, planning and implementation processes in northern Australia. As such the project aims to track progress of regional NRM, identify emerging constraints, lessons and adaptive management opportunities for improving regional planning systems. The specific objectives are:

1. To develop, test and refine criteria and methods for evaluating regional NRM plans and institutional arrangements for natural resource management in regions;
2. To collaborate with regional planners and relevant government agencies to apply the evaluation framework in savanna regions; and
3. To support adaptive management of regional NRM policy, regional arrangements and planning practices through evaluation.

Earlier reports from the research including workshop reports, technical reviews of regional NRM plans and the first *Benchmark Report* (2004-5) are available at the following website: [http://savanna.cdu.edu.au/research/projects/healthy\\_savanna\\_pla.html](http://savanna.cdu.edu.au/research/projects/healthy_savanna_pla.html)

## 1.3. Second benchmark of regional planning arrangements

This is the second '*Benchmark Report*' of the project. It informs on the progress of regional planning for NRM in northern regions for the period June 2005 until May 2006. Together with the first *Benchmark Report* (McDonald *et al* 2005a), the two reports provide sequential and evaluative waypoints in implementation of regional NRM initiatives.

The first *Benchmark Report* (McDonald *et al* 2005a) provides insights into the establishment and planning phase of regional NRM, using data collected between late 2003 and early 2005. It also evaluates the effectiveness and adequacy of State and regional level responses to the challenges of that early planning phase.

This document, the second *Benchmark Report*, places particular emphasis on the subsequent transitional phase that most regional NRM bodies and their stakeholders experienced. The transitional phase refers to the period between finalisation of regional NRM plans and reaching full capability to engage in mature implementation activities.

This report presents i) the framework used to evaluate regional planning activity for NRM in these regions; ii) findings from the second phase of a 3-year evaluation of those arrangements and, iii) presents lessons from the current experience and a series of options to improve future program design, planning practice and research for regional NRM in northern Australia.

## 1.4. Study area

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, Mines and Water (DNRMW) has provided the resources to also include Queensland's non-savanna regions in the evaluation (see Figure 1).

## 1.5. Overview of NRM arrangements and regional NRM bodies

This section provides a brief overview of each of the three jurisdictions and the NRM planning and investment regions within those jurisdictions. We focus primarily on those activities and institutional arrangements associated with the delivery of the NHT and NAP programs due the expansive nature of trying to provide a detailed overview of the full and ever changing complement of NRM initiatives in those regions. Several sources provide a more detailed overview of the broader suite of institutions involved in NRM in the savannas and Australia's rangelands (see for example McDonald *et al* 2004; Dale and Bellamy 1998; Johnson *et al* 1999; UWS 2002).

To understand the real impact of the NAP/NHT initiatives, they need to be considered in the context of the broader suite of actors, activities, planning and management institutions affecting the use of natural resources in those regions. These regional NRM planning initiatives form only one element, albeit significant, of a broader system of regional planning. The concept of a regional planning system (Dale and Cowell 1999; Morrison 2004) that emphasises the connectivity between elements in that system is central to the evaluation approach adopted here.

Adopting this broader contextual scope in the evaluation design is also important if some of the key underlying assumptions and expectations of the regional NRM program model are to be adequately tested. Those assumptions are that a primary role of regional bodies, their plans and investment strategies is to be an integrative agent at the regional scale and between scales, improving the coordination of resource management efforts and investment in their region (Commonwealth of Australia and State of Queensland 2004).

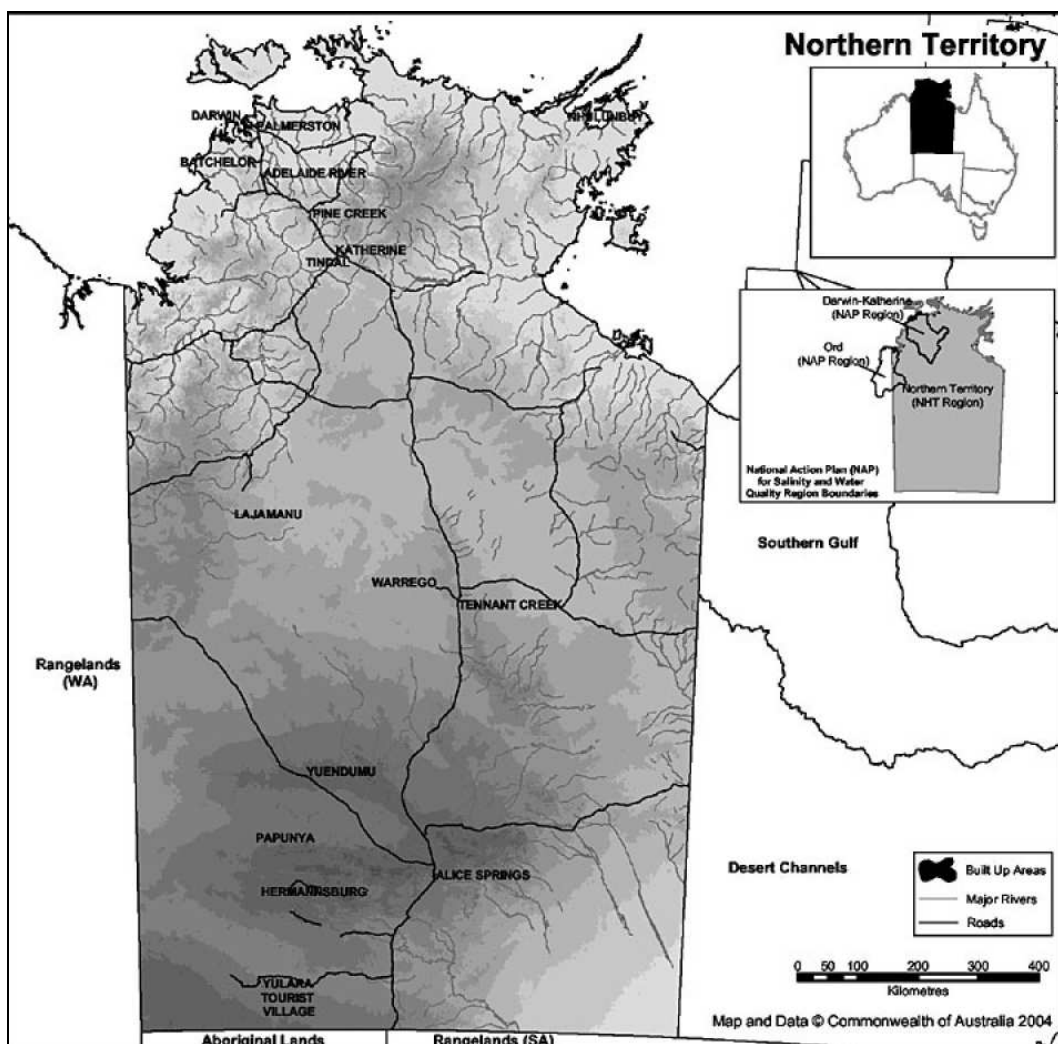
This includes the coordination of government and statutory initiatives. Many regions also contend with a suite of sub-regional and local land and water management networks. This suite of activities, many of which pre-date the current regional NRM model, include integrated catchment management networks, Landcare groups, or statutory committees such as Land and Conservation District Committees in Western Australia.

In the Queensland context, examples of these other initiatives include Water Resource Plans under the Water Act 2000, regulatory codes for vegetation clearing under the Vegetation Management Act 1999, and Regional Coastal Management Plans under State coastal management legislation. There are also expectations that regional NRM plans link with local government planning instruments or regional scale planning frameworks for population growth, infrastructure and economic development under Queensland's Integrated Planning Act 1997. In Western Australia, Regional Development Commissions promote regional economic and social development through planning and regional investment processes. In the Northern Territory, Regional Development Plans are being prepared by Regional Boards and there are also moves to amalgamate and regionalise local councils into Regional Authorities under the Building Stronger Regions – Stronger Futures policy (Northern Territory Government 2002). In addition, there are also a number of macro-regional planning processes that influence regional body initiatives in the north. Two key examples of these include planning for the Northern Planning Area by the National Oceans Office and the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan in Queensland.

Considering this, it becomes quickly apparent that the institutional and organisational planning environment in which regional bodies are required to operate is remarkably complex.

### 1.5.1. Northern Territory

For the delivery of NHT, the Northern Territory is treated as a single NRM region (see Figure 3). Under the Bilateral Agreement with the Australian Government there are however discrete investment regions within the Territory at which NAP investment is also focused. These include the Darwin-Katherine region containing the Daly and Mary River catchments and the Ord River Region (Commonwealth of Australia and Northern Territory Government 2003). The Daly is significant in the Territory context given major recent investment in an *Integrated Regional Land Use Planning* initiative (Northern Territory Government 2004) for that catchment which has, more recently, been re-targeted to focus on water quality management pressures. This process also generated significant lessons on appropriate structures and scales for Indigenous engagement (Jackson 2005). The Ord region is also significant in that arrangements here represent cross-jurisdictional cooperation between Western Australian and Northern Territory Governments.



**Figure 3. The Northern Territory NRM region**

(Source: Australian Government 2004)

The organisational arrangements for the nominated regional body changed during this second phase of the evaluation. The *Landcare Council of the Northern Territory* (LCNT) coordinated stakeholder engagement and the plan development process that began in March 2004 and saw the Plan accredited in May 2005. In December 2005 the newly formed *Natural Resource Management Board (NRMB) Northern Territory* was formally incorporated as the regional

body for the Territory (WalterTurnbull 2005). The newly created NRMB is responsible and accountable for (DNREA 2006):

- identifying and integrating opportunities and priorities for the management of the natural resources of the Northern Territory particularly through review of the NRM Plan and RIS as appropriate;
- promoting and nurturing partnerships aimed at achieving the outcomes of the NRM Plan;
- managing investment funds made available by governments or other investors; and
- reporting to stakeholders (including managers of natural resources, community organisations and groups) on the processes for and outcomes of such investments.

Currently, the NRMB consists of a Chairman, an Executive Officer and five members, who are either community, industry or government representatives. The board is assisted by the work of three regional facilitators, while the NT Government is providing additional administrative and monitoring support. The RIS for the Northern Territory was accredited in June 2005. According to the RIS, the Australian Government has committed \$21 million for investment in NRM over the period 2004/5 to 2006/7. Of this amount, \$19.5 million is NHT investment and \$1.5 million is NAP investment (LCNT 2005).

### **1.5.2. Western Australia**

Western Australia's *Rangelands NRM region* is one of six regions and accounts for close to some ninety percent of that state (see Figure 4). The Kimberly sub-region is the most northern subregion in the Rangelands NRM region. The Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group, an incorporated association responsible for delivering NRM planning under NHT, was officially formed in December 2002.



**Figure 4. The Rangelands NRM Region and sub-regions**  
(Source: Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group 2006)

The Coordinating Group is a community-based organisation that consists of a Chairman and eleven board members, consisting of community, industry, State agency and local government representatives. Regional facilitators, state government agencies, project steering committees and an Aboriginal Reference Group assist the work of the board.

The objectives of the Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group are:

- To be the accountable Community / Government partnership group, representative of Western Australia's Rangeland sub-regions NRM stakeholders;
- Co-ordinate and guide the development of a sub-regional framework for involvement and representation of Natural Resources Management stakeholders in WA's Rangelands;
- Develop a strategy and associated investment plans for Natural Resources Management in WA Rangelands. The strategy will be founded on sub-regional structure and is required to meet joint State & Commonwealth Government accreditation criteria;
- Determine and recommend priorities for Community, Government and industry investment in Natural Resources Management in WA Rangelands; and
- Encourage community participation and involvement in NRM processes.

The Rangelands region is divided into four distinct sub-regions, including the Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne-Murchison and Goldfields-Nullarbor. The Kimberley sub-region, northern most of these, lies within the tropical savannas and is an important focus for the evaluation. This subregion developed their sub-regional integrated NRM plan through extensive stakeholder consultation in 2003-5, which then contributed to the development of the broader Rangelands strategy, accredited in December 2005. The investment strategy for the Rangelands region is under development at time of writing.

The Kimberley sub-region also contains the Ord Catchment, a priority investment region in its own right under NAP. The Ord Reference Group is the management structure for NAP in that catchment and emerged from the existing Ord Irrigation Cooperative, and Ord Land and Water organisations, the latter of which had developed the *Ord Land and Water Management Plan*, to address water quality issues in the irrigation area. With a population of nearly 34,000 in 2002, including some fifty percent Indigenous people living in remote communities, the Kimberley has a similar social planning context to that of the Northern Territory.

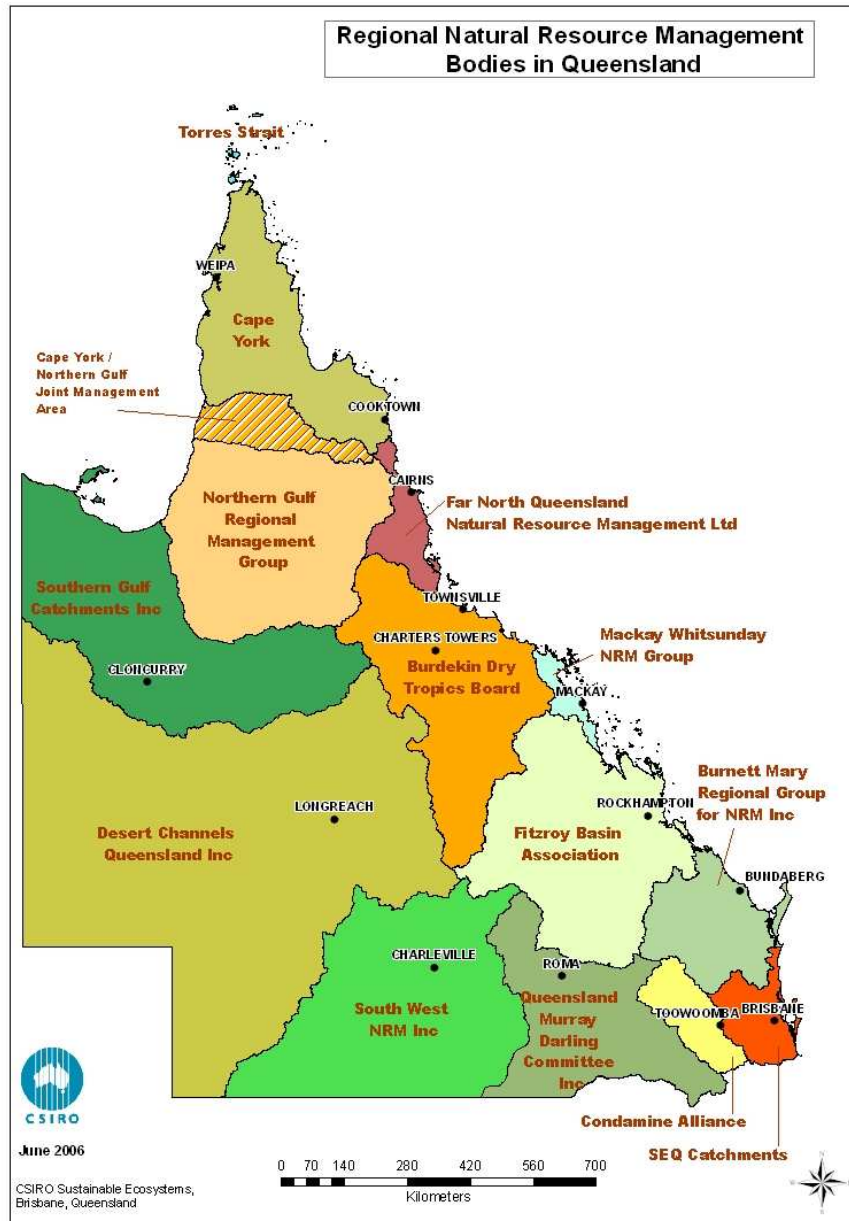
### 1.5.3. Queensland

Queensland has fourteen NRM regions designated for the purposes of planning and investment under the NAP and NHT programs. All fourteen regions receive funds through the NHT; however, only Burdekin, Fitzroy, Queensland Murray Darling, Condamine, Burnett-Mary and SEQ Catchments<sup>4</sup> also receive funding as priority investment regions under the NAP (see Figure 5). There is considerable variation in funding levels between regions funded under both programs and those funded solely under the NHT. An indicative allocation of some \$146 million has been allocated to regions in Queensland for investment in NRM over the period 2004/5 to 2006/7 (Queensland and Commonwealth Government 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> Until 2005, Queensland had 15 NRM groups. In early 2006, Natural Resource Management South East Queensland (NRM SEQ) and South East Queensland Western Catchments Group (SEQ WCG) merged to form 'SEQ Catchments' to administer both NHT and NAP funds.

Each of these fourteen NRM regions has a designated non-statutory regional body responsible for planning and investment activity under those programs. A number of these NRM groups have evolved from earlier regional strategy groups established under the first round of the NHT in the late 1990s.



**Figure 5. NRM Regions in Queensland**  
(Source: CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems 2006)

The governance arrangements of the fourteen regional bodies vary from region to region being either incorporated associations or private companies limited by guarantee (WalterTurnbull 2005). Each regional body has a majority of community membership selected on merit whilst balancing stakeholder interests, including Indigenous and local government interests.

While some regional bodies have a large number of members and support from advisory groups and coordinators, others are operating on a smaller scale with less personnel and resources. Even though local government representation is common, no State government agencies are represented on Boards. DNRMW is the lead agency for the provision of support and advice to Queensland's regional bodies.

However, since 2002 there has been an on-going and growing involvement of several other State government agencies through four Regional Coordination Group<sup>5</sup> (RCG) forums across the state.

Presently, thirteen of the fourteen NRM regions have prepared regional NRM plans and RISs, accredited and endorsed by both State and Australian Governments. The Cape York NRM region has so far only a draft NRM plan and a draft RIS that are both still awaiting accreditation from the Minister. The Torres Strait NRM region has special arrangements in that the NRM plan and RIS were recently combined into the Torres Strait NRM Strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> These are regular forums of regional state agency representatives and regional bodies. There are four RCGs operating in Queensland, namely South West, South East, Central West and North.

## 2. Methods

This report measures progress of regional arrangements against the same criteria used for the first *Benchmark Report* (McDonald *et al.* 2005a) allowing comparison between the first and second benchmark report findings. Bellamy *et al.* (2005) discuss in detail the major concepts supporting the development and application of the evaluation framework and criteria used here. This section of the report presents an overview of the approach adopted; evaluation framework and specific benchmarking criteria; the key methods for data collection; and, caveats associated with those.

### 2.1 Approach

The overall approach of this project is to develop and apply a longitudinal and participatory evaluation framework for regional NRM planning arrangements in the tropical savannas. To realise the longitudinal function the evaluation was conducted in two discrete phases. At each phase the same evaluation concepts and criteria were applied. The results of each of these two phases represent a benchmarking of planning arrangements against those criteria. This has allowed an appraisal of progress, constraints and lessons from each of the two phases, in effect, providing successive, evaluative waypoints in implementation of regional NRM. The two phases of the evaluation are defined by the primary function or set of functions regional bodies were conducting during that period of time. The connection between these two phases, the major steps and timeframes in project delivery are shown below in Figure 6.

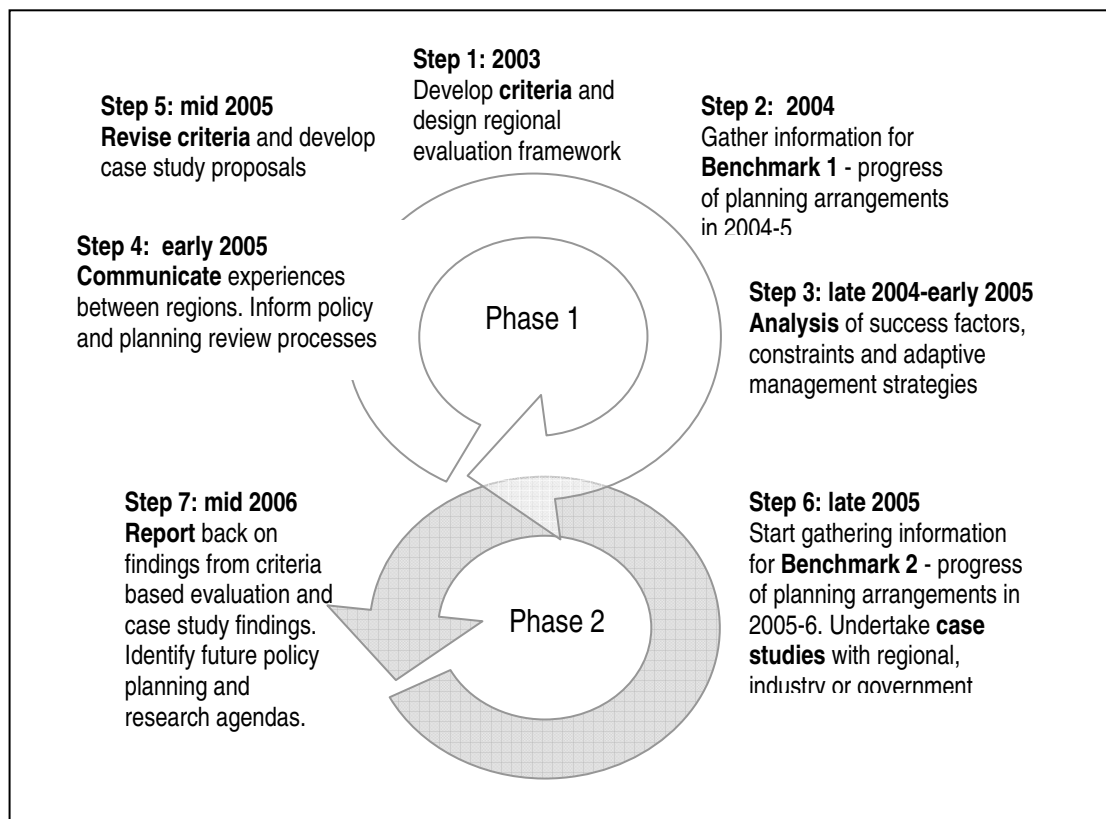


Figure 6. Major project implementation steps in the two evaluation phases 2003-6

The first phase of the evaluation captured insights from the establishment (or start-up), early engagement and plan development phase of regional NRM, using data collected between late 2003 and early 2005 with results presented in the first *Benchmark Report*. The timing of this second phase of the evaluation sees more emphasis in the transitional period (June 2005 until May 2006) involving finalisation of regional NRM plans and regional bodies in early stages of implementation.

## 2.2 Evaluation framework and criteria

The evaluation framework consists of four major components representing four ways of looking at the planning and management system for natural resources in regions. These four components are regional context, structures, processes and outcomes (see Bellamy *et al* 2005).

- *Context* is concerned with the nature of the *place* in which regional planning occurs i.e. a region's physical and social setting. It is also concerned with how previous events and different stakeholders' experiences or culture influences current NRM arrangements and success.
- *Structures* are the more tangible institutional arrangements in place that support or influence regional NRM activity. These may include a range of organisations such as government agencies, regional bodies and their governance arrangements. It also includes regulatory or policy instruments in operation, funding programs and rules, or data management, sharing or monitoring infrastructure.
- *Processes* are closely linked to *structures* and are often difficult to differentiate. However these are more concerned with *how* different players and organisations interact and undertake their management and planning roles. This may include processes that influence stakeholder capacity, knowledge integration and sharing or that link activity between local and regional levels.
- *Outcomes* are the intentional and unintentional products of regional NRM activity. These include *enabling* outcomes such as improved capacity of individuals and institutions. It includes the development of tools or approaches to improve on-ground works or substantive changes in the condition of the natural resource base. Outcomes may be direct or indirect. They can also be negative or beneficial in nature. Given the significant lag periods in realising some types of resource condition change, stakeholder perceptions or expectations of likely outcomes are included here.

Each component is linked to, and informed by, several evaluation criteria. These criteria are presented in Table 1. The main body of the report presents the results of the evaluation under these criteria headings. The methods for collecting data against these criteria are discussed in the following section.

**Table 1. Criteria for evaluation of regional NRM planning arrangements**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<b>Context criteria</b>	<b>Recognises that implementation of regional NRM is affected by a wide range of environmental, economic, social, policy/institutional and technological factors</b>
1. Thinking 'regionally'	Regional stakeholders have a clear identification with the NRM region, an acceptance of its NRM issues and are generally thinking 'regionally'.
2. 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.
3. Understanding NRM	Recognition by regional stakeholders of the 'multi-dimensional nature' of NRM, i.e. social, economic, environmental and institutional/political dimensions.
4. Recognising regional diversity & complexity	Diversity and complexity of the social, economic, ecological and institutional characteristics of the region are recognised and widely understood.
<b>Structure criteria</b>	<b>Addresses the rules and institutional arrangements relating to regional NRM</b>
5. Coherent policy and governance structures	The degree to which policy, program, governance (and legislative) structures agree in intent, are consistent and logically connected.
6. Aligned institutions	Institutions have a high degree of integration and adaptiveness to support regional priorities.
7. Roles and responsibilities	Roles and responsibilities in regional NRM arrangements are clearly defined and understood.
8. Participation and engagement structures	Integrity and inclusiveness of participation and engagement structures is apparent.
9. Adequate regional resourcing	Resources are adequate to support regional NRM planning and long-term certainty exists regarding future funding.
10. Monitoring return on investment	Mechanisms are in place to monitor and assess returns on investment.
11. 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.
<b>Process criteria</b>	<b>Addresses the activities, operations and relationships that define and influence regional NRM</b>
12. 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.
13. Capacity to participate	Capacity exists for all players to participate in regional planning, management or implementation processes.
14. Procedural fairness	Processes that support regional NRM are widely perceived as fair.
15. 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.
16. Linking scales and activities	Processes support and exhibit connectivity within and between scales
<b>Outcomes criteria</b>	<b>Reflects outputs produced and impacts from regional NRM to date</b>
17. 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.
18. Effective and connected institutions	Connectivity between state, regional, sub-regional and local activities; and effective and connected processes and structures at the regional scale.
19. Improved resource condition	Condition of priority natural, social, cultural and economic resources in regions.

### 2.2.1. Adapting the evaluation framework

A major contribution of information to the first *Benchmark Report* was the analysis of data from interviews with regional planners and state government officers, participant observation of regional NRM fora and the review of regional NRM plans (see McDonald *et al* 2005a; 2005b). The implementation of the project also provides for refinement of the approach between the two evaluation phases. Consistent with this, some modifications to both the criteria and the data collection methods have been made for this second report based on experiences from the first benchmarking process. In part these changes were driven by an expanded scope of the evaluation to include Northern Territory and Western Australian regions in a more formal sense. These changes were also driven however by an improved understanding of the relative values and applicability of criteria and information gathering methods. A summary of the methods used in the two phases of the evaluation is presented in Table 2 below. Specific aspects of the approach are then expanded on.

**Table 2. Summary of evaluation phases and methods**

	<b>PHASE 1</b> <b>Benchmark 1 report – 2004-5</b>	<b>PHASE 2</b> <b>Benchmark 2 report - 2005-6</b>
<b>Focus</b>	Establishment and planning phase	Transition to early implementation
<b>Primary methods</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In-depth key-informant interviews</li> <li>2. Regional Plan reviews</li> <li>3. Participant observation of regional fora and planning activity</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Web-based survey (closed and open ended questions)</li> <li>2. 'Issue' focused multi-regional case studies (8)</li> <li>3. Regional Investment Strategy analysis</li> </ol>
<b>Secondary methods</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Policy analysis</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Policy analysis</li> </ol>
<b>Jurisdictions</b>	Queensland	Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia
<b>Time frame</b>	Late 2003-early 2005	Mid 2005-mid 2006
<b>Benefits</b>	Allowed detailed understanding, personal contact and trust to develop between project team and participants; facilitated testing of criteria	Refine and apply criteria more consistently and efficiently Greater focus on 'relevant' / tangible issues and regions More targeted contact
<b>Costs</b>	Labour intensive, slow turn around time of findings; impacts on currency of findings	Less direct contact with large number of participants (Visibility of team and evaluation)

### 2.3. Key informant survey

One of the primary information gathering methods of this second evaluation phase was a web delivered key informant social survey. The survey was adapted from the key informant interviews applied in the first phase of the evaluation following a formal review by the project team of criteria and method efficacy. The web-based survey format was chosen as the most effective and efficient means to gather data from across Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australian regions.

In keeping with the evaluation logic of the first phase, the key informant approach saw a respondent database compiled from the population of regional body chairs, executive officers, planners or operations managers. Similarly, State/Territory government agency staff were selected who had direct involvement with regional body activity – through technical, program, policy support and advisory roles, representative roles on regional bodies directly, or through forums for negotiating partnership arrangements. To improve response rates and help explain the context of the survey, respondents were contacted directly via telephone by project team members. If individuals agreed to participate, an email containing a web link to the survey and instructions was forwarded to participants. To ensure a high level of confidentiality and security of survey responses, access to the survey website was by invitation and protected by a unique identifier and password supplied to the respondent through the survey administrator. In total, 89 key informants were identified, of these 86 were able to be contacted, from which 66% successfully completed the survey (Table 3). Two of these surveys were conducted by telephone and the data entered manually for analysis. Textual and Likert scale responses from other respondents were captured directly within a Microsoft Excel database supported by the web format to minimise data handling prior to analysis.

**Table 3. Respondent profile by jurisdiction, respondent type and investment region type**  
(n = number of respondents)

	n	%	Regional body	Government	NAP region	NHT only region
Western Australia	9	16	3	6	1	8
Northern Territory <sup>1</sup>	3	5	2	1	0 <sup>2</sup>	3
Queensland	45	79	25	20	9 <sup>3</sup>	16 <sup>3</sup>
Total respondents	57	100	30	27	10	27

<sup>1</sup> Respondents from the Northern Territory were all members of the Landcare Council of the NT, which was replaced by the Natural Resource Management Board in December 2005

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Territory also receives NAP funding for projects in the Daly, Mary and Ord River catchments

<sup>3</sup> This only includes regional body respondents, not government respondents

In total, the survey consisted of 22 questions, including 6 open-ended questions - to which respondents could provide answers of considerable length - and 16 structured, Likert scale questions. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the web-based survey.

Each of the sixteen Likert scale questions consisted of four parts, namely:

- i. Respondent's perception of *current condition* of an attribute of regional NRM e.g. clear roles and responsibilities;
- ii. Respondent's perception of the *trend in the condition* of that attribute over the last 12 month period i.e. improving, not improving;
- iii. Respondent's perception of the *importance* of that attribute to successful regional NRM; and,
- iv. Respondents were asked to *justify* their responses or provide *examples* in an open text box provided.

The remaining six open-ended questions sought respondent perceptions on:

- i. Changes to regional NRM arrangements over the last 12 months;
- ii. Strengths of the current regional approach;
- iii. Aspects of the current regional NRM approach that were "not working";
- iv. Short term actions needed to ensure success in the next 1-3 years;
- v. Major achievements to date; and
- vi. Expected longer-term outcomes from the regional NRM approach.

Ordinal and textual data collected from the Likert scale questions were analysed using descriptive and inferential techniques to summarise commonalities and differences between responses and between regions. Text responses to the open-ended questions were coded using a thematic structure, with each response individually coded to that structure. Individual responses relevant to each theme were then merged and analysed as a common group of responses to draw out the commonalities and variations on each theme.

## **2.4. Case studies in regional planning**

This second phase of the evaluation has also involved undertaking several discrete case studies in regional planning. These case studies complement the results generated through the key informant survey discussed above. Case studies have been undertaken to provide an issue-based, planning tool or stakeholder specific focus in what is otherwise a largely synoptic evaluation framework. Moreover, the case studies have been designed to involve a broader range of participants than the key informant survey, which has focussed primarily on regional body staff and state government agency staff engaged in regional NRM. Case studies also help build on an understanding of key issues that either underpin evaluation criteria or have emerged as issues or gaps through the first benchmarking report. Part of the rationale for the case study approach was to provide a vehicle for lesson sharing and application of research outcomes

A summary of each of the case studies is presented in the companion milestone report, *Case studies in Regional Natural Resource Management in Northern Australia* (McDonald *et al* 2006). The eight case studies are:

1. Pastoral stakeholders and regional NRM planning: better partnerships in savanna regions
2. Community engagement in remote regions
3. Biodiversity in action
4. Success factors for getting science on-the-ground
5. Managing diffuse-source water pollution in northern Australia
6. Country-based management
7. Regional investment patterns and trends in NRM
8. Evaluating weeds outcomes

Case studies 3, 6 and 8 were developed through collaboration of project team members with other researchers or through adapting and translating findings from recent or existing research to the content of regional planning in savanna regions. Most case studies were co-developed with relevant savanna stakeholders and each study includes at least two regions within the tropical savannas.

## **2.5. Caveats and considerations**

There are some caveats or considerations for readers in relation to interpretation of the results from the analysis in the following section, 3.0. These relate to the timing of the data gathering activities, and, a note on respondent perspectives in the analysis.

### *Timing of the evaluation and 'stage' of planning in regions*

Amongst other factors, the timing of the enabling political agreements signed between State/Territory and Australian governments differs between Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. Again, even within Queensland each of the fourteen NRM regions have progressed at different rates. As such, the evaluation captures regional experiences at different stages of maturity. During the current evaluation period, and between this one and the last, organisational arrangements within regions have also been fluid and changing. For example, the regional body of the Northern Territory had been in transition to a new organisational arrangement during the period the survey was conducted (see section 1.5.1 above). As such the results should be read in the context of a fluid institutional environment for regional NRM, not a static point in time assessment.

### *Whose perspective?*

The target population identified for the key informant survey consisted of regional planners, executive officers and chairs of regional bodies and their boards, and, State and Territory government agency officers working with regional bodies at the 'regional' level. As such, the responses reflect an 'insiders' position on issues affecting the delivery of regional NRM, and are often focused on organisational, administrative and political aspects of regional body activity.

There are considerably more NRM regions, and hence regional NRM bodies, in Queensland than in Western Australia and Northern Territory (see Table 3). Because of this the survey responses are largely from Queensland NRM regions. To ensure a picture from each of the jurisdictions still emerges, distinctions are made between or examples given from each jurisdiction in the reporting of the results. There is another spatial bias in the survey with a larger number of extensive rangelands regions being surveyed than intensive or urbanised coastal regions.

### 3. Results

This section of the report presents the results of the key informant survey. The results are organised under the main evaluation framework components of regional **context**, **structures**, **processes**, and **outcomes**. The data presented includes responses to open-ended qualitative questions and structured Likert scale questions from the survey. Under each of the four components data is reported against specific evaluation criteria and, where of more general value, directly under the component headings.

#### **Notation used in results**

Within the open-ended responses, numbers in brackets, for example (3), indicate the number of respondents that reported a particular issue or addressed a specific theme in their comments. Within the closed, Likert scale responses numbers in brackets – for example (r32) – refer to a unique respondent identifier to allow confidential attribution of examples provided by respondents.

### 3.1. Regional context

The results presented in this section inform evaluation criteria associated with the social, political and physical context of the planning regions. These criteria include stakeholder acceptance of NRM issues, the ability for stakeholders to consider regional scale implications of actions; the presence of a culture of collaboration and commitment to the regional approach; and, the impacts of a region's demographic, biophysical and institutional characteristics.

#### **Open-ended questions: change in the region during the past year**

The first open-ended question of the survey asked respondents "compared to 12 months ago what is different about doing NRM business in your region". A synthesis of their responses provides some background to understanding common experiences in changes to the regional context for NRM activity between 2004-5 and 2005-6.

In general there is increased recognition of, and confidence in, regional bodies as the peak bodies for coordinating NRM in the regions (5) and, along with this an increased awareness of sustainable NRM and its issues (3).

The regional NRM delivery process has moved into a new phase with the development of the regional NRM plans and RISs in place and implementation beginning (26). This transition has meant that fewer disparate projects are being undertaken and a holistic systems approach, as opposed to a project-based approach, is becoming more important. There is greater clarity of purpose as priorities for investment have been established (4) and some real outcomes are expected in the near future. The principal large area of uncertainty remaining is the resolution of future arrangements in Queensland beyond June 2007, which [at the time of the survey] still depends on the outcomes from the Options Paper released by that State's government<sup>6</sup> (Queensland Government 2005).

A small minority of respondents indicate that not all regional organisations are securely in the implementation phase. For some, arrangements are still in the transitional phase, not quite bedded down and lacking certainty; for others work remains to be completed with as yet little prospect for action. A few respondents refer back to the lengthy, time-consuming and expensive planning phase and, particularly in the Northern Territory, to the loss of pre-existing relationships and certainties in the move to new NHT structures. Two of Queensland's NRM regions have as yet been unsuccessful in completing the community consultation and planning stage.

More generally, there is a better understanding of new roles and responsibilities for all partners, although some administrative issues that continue to cause frustration remain to be clarified. Overall, there is an obvious sense of pride in what has been accomplished and there is an increased confidence in the maturity of the regional organisations (4). In general, sound business systems are now in place and are effectively supporting delivery. Amongst these are processes for negotiating in-kind, producing performance reports and RIS reviews. Funds are flowing more smoothly in general but particularly for on-ground works (4).

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<sup>6</sup> Post the major data collection for this report the Australian government announced in March/ April 2006 ongoing commitment to funding regional NRM plan implementation until 2008/9. Similarly during this period there has been considerable speculation and evidence of some activity (e.g. Ministerial NRM Council's NRM Taskforce) of a possible third round of the Natural Heritage Trust following 2008/9.

A few respondents note that many investment partnerships are in place, leveraging greater investment than anticipated. In some regions the immediate issue is now to avoid being deflected from the timely planned expenditure of funds.

In some cases temporary accommodations have given way to more permanent arrangements and the optimal staff size is beginning to become clearer. Regional staff are in position and increasingly functioning as an effective team. In a few regions recent changes to organisational structures, boards, CEOs and budgets are expected to present new challenges and provoke adjustments to existing ways of operating.

Some contextual issues were also raised in response to an open-ended question asking “what aspects of the regional NRM process are not working?” The bulk of regional NRM organisations expressed concerns that with the achievement of accredited plans and funded investment strategies behind most regional bodies, issues of regularising relationships, coming to terms with everyone’s expectations and getting works happening on the ground were the significant challenges facing them at that time. This included regularising relationships at the Australian Government, State government and sub-regional levels.

### 3.1.1. Thinking regionally (criterion 1)

Responses to the statement ‘stakeholders in the region recognise and accept the major NRM issues facing the region’ are reported below. Some examples given by respondents are also provided.

#### Current situation (n=56)

There is a relatively strong perception amongst respondents that stakeholders recognise and accept the major NRM issues facing the region. In total, 61% agree with the statement. For example, a Queensland regional body respondent states, “there has been a greater recognition of NRM issues by a greater number of community people” (r15). Similarly, a regional government agency respondent comments that the recognition of NRM issues has improved through a “continued increase in stakeholder involvement, the finalisation of NRM plans, and the commencement of significant investment flowing from RISs” (r44). However, several respondents (18%) do not agree with the statement. For example, one rangeland region respondent states, “there is the size issue and it can be difficult for sub-regions to see the importance of issues in other sub-regions” (r33). Respondents note other barriers to successful stakeholder recognition of NRM issues including ineffective community consultation, lack of communication` and ‘shared language’, and competing issues (eg. health, education, economy).

#### Trend (n=56)

Overall, most responses suggest that stakeholders increasingly recognise and accept NRM issues facing their regions. Commonly, respondents identify a positive trend but believe that more work is needed in this area. For instance, a respondent from Western Australia comments that “there was a very low level of awareness of regional NRM prior to the strategy development process. This has improved but there is still a long way to go” (r23).

#### Importance (n=54)

There is strong agreement that stakeholder recognition and acceptance of NRM issues is very important. Several respondents comment that recognising and accepting NRM issues is a vital premise for stakeholders taking ownership of environmental problems and committing to the implementation of solutions. For example, one respondent says, “if stakeholders do not recognise and accept NRM issues, this lack of ownership will be a barrier to involvement and achievement of outcomes” (r41).

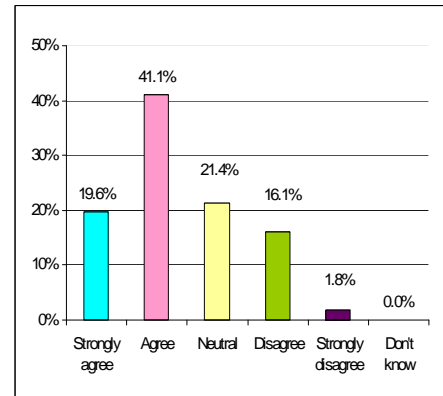


Figure 8a. Current situation of stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

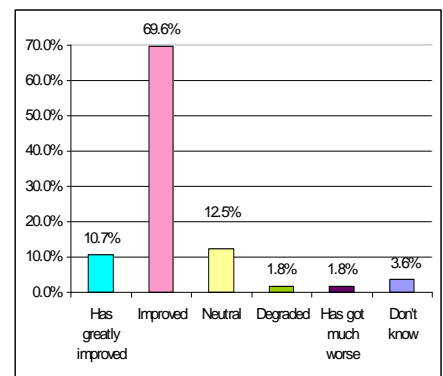


Figure 8b. Trend in stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

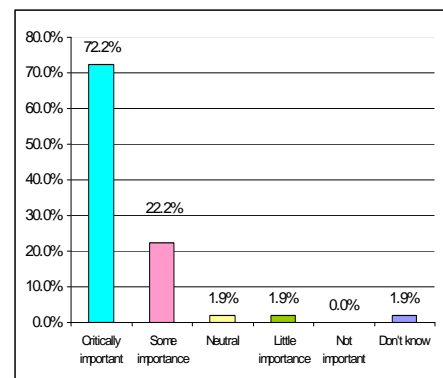


Figure 8c. Importance of stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

### 3.1.2. Stakeholder culture and commitment (criterion 2)

Responses to the statement ‘it is common practice for different stakeholders to collaborate in solving NRM problems’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=54)

Some two-thirds of respondents (67%) agree that stakeholders currently collaborate on NRM problems. One respondent from a regional body in QLD comments that “since the sector engagement program began over 12 months ago there has been a greater collaboration between stakeholders that would normally have disagreed” (r11). On the other hand, a few respondents (14.8%) disagree that stakeholder collaboration is now common practice. Some believe that the mining sector and urban stakeholders are underrepresented, limiting opportunities for collaboration - while collaboration with local governments has not extended to deliver on-ground works. In one rangeland region “distances, changing ownership and management, and inconsistent funding are stumbling blocks to making collaboration more common” (r21).

#### Trend (n=54)

Nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) believe there is a positive trend in stakeholder collaboration in the regions. For instance, one QLD regional body respondent states, “the amount of support we have from our conservation and indigenous sectors is proof of how things are improving” (r14). Contrary to this positive view, a small number of respondents believe that collaborative approaches have not improved. For example, one government respondent comments that “from my perspective the amount of collaboration has not changed and may even have decreased as regional bodies build up their own technical capacity and therefore have less need to call on state agencies” (r45).

#### Importance (n=52)

There is particularly strong agreement in responses that stakeholder collaboration is critically important. Several of these address why stakeholder collaboration is needed to successfully achieve NRM outcomes. Respondents from rangeland regions tend to comment on the need to work together since there is only limited funding available to tackle NRM issues.

#### Open-ended questions: culture and commitment

The open-ended questions also identified a number of respondent perspectives regarding stakeholder culture and commitment. In response to the question “what aspects of the regional NRM process are not working?” some respondents believe that the involvement of both the Australian Government (5) and the State agency policy sections (2) has fallen away in recent

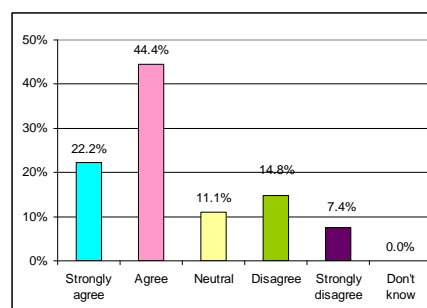


Figure 9a. Current situation of stakeholder collaboration

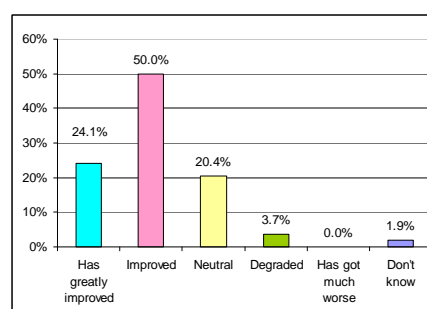


Figure 9b. Trend of stakeholder collaboration

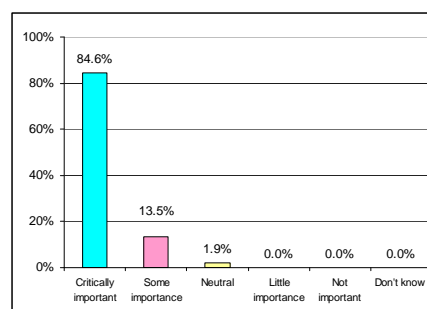


Figure 9c. Importance of stakeholder collaboration

times, to the extent that the Australian Government is now seen to operate only at the Joint Steering Committee (JSC) level. For some, however, this distancing of the Australian Government from regional business has been welcome, as it has reduced perceived transaction costs (2).

There were widely held views that relationships with State and Territory government agencies also present ongoing challenges and require improvement (15). There is still a perceived lack of government input (4) in some regions although this may be a reflection of inadequate agency staffing or resources as much as an agency decision not to be involved. Awareness of the regional process also varies within agencies, with some units having “little or no idea about regional NRM delivery”, unless a regional body has specifically contacted them. In-kind support is occasionally mentioned (2) but issues surrounding alignment are more problematic.

One regional body respondent reported that constant change in key contact personnel in government agencies lead to variable advice from within and between government departments over priorities for management and ongoing commitment.

Issues around the culture of the regional bodies were also raised. In particular, respondents commented that the relationships between the 14 regional bodies in Queensland is characterised by a culture of competition rather than collaboration and cooperation.

Survey respondents also identified several factors associated with culture and commitment they believed should be addressed in the short term. These include:

- Government culture needs to be able to “accommodate and learn from the odd ‘failure’;”
- An impatience for the range of stakeholders, including State and Australian government, to commit to the regional delivery process (8); and,
- Specifically, confirmation of commitment from governments to underpin secure resourcing, help to resolve current staffing difficulties, encourage the search for support beyond grants, and affirm strategic long-term planning for NRM (15). In the Queensland context this meant a clear statement of commitment by the state government following resolution of the issues in the Options paper.

### 3.1.3. Understanding NRM (criterion 3)

Responses to the statement ‘stakeholders in the region recognise the social, economic and environmental aspects of NRM’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=55)

Approximately half of the respondents (55%) state that stakeholders currently recognise social, economic and environmental aspects of NRM and that “many stakeholders are more seriously considering the triple bottom line” (r12). One response provided a succinct example that “many stakeholders are aware that a well managed environment leads to better grazing conditions, better returns and happier families” (r21). On the other hand, over one-quarter (27%) of responses are neutral and a further (15%) disagree. A common view across responses however is that economic concerns still predominate over environmental and social considerations, reflected in “self-interest” (r41) and exacerbated by conditions of hardship such as drought (r51).

#### Trend (n=55)

Fifty-six percent of respondents consider stakeholder recognition of the triple bottom line is improving in the past twelve months. However, it is important to note that some forty percent of respondents believe that the situation has remained unchanged. For example, one government agency respondent comments that “not a lot of work has been done to progress and improve the recognition of the triple bottom line in regions” (r50).

#### Importance (n=52)

Some ninety-four percent of respondents agree that it is important for stakeholders to recognise social, economic and environmental aspects of NRM. Benefits arising from this commonly cited, include improved communication with stakeholders and more effective on ground outcomes. One respondent however comments that the triple bottom line benefits of NRM investment have “not been sold well” (r5).

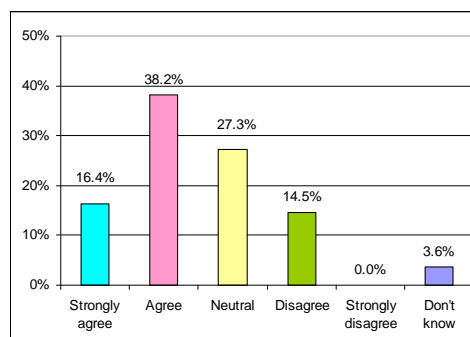


Figure 10a. Current situation of recognising the triple bottom line

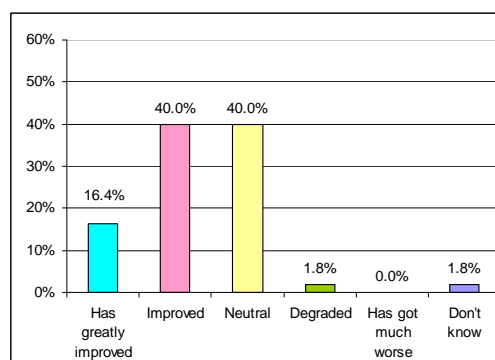


Figure 10b. Trend in recognising the triple bottom line

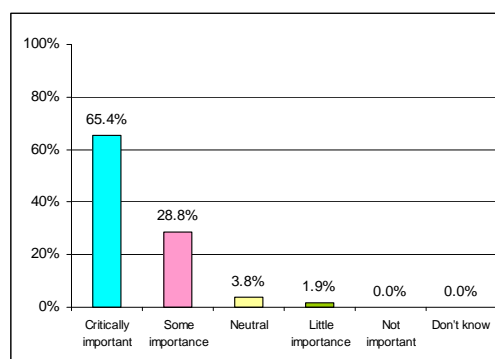


Figure 10c. Importance of recognising the triple bottom line

#### **3.1.4. Recognising regional diversity and complexity (criterion 4)**

No Likert scale questions in the survey directly addressed criterion four. Responses to the open-ended questions however raised the following issues.

##### **Open-ended questions: regional diversity and complexity**

A number of respondents mention that the ‘smaller’ scale of operations provided by a regional approach – as opposed to a state level approach - brings greater flexibility in resource management. It was also reported, however, that for much of the rangelands, the scale of coordination is still immense (3). Respondents in large rangeland regions commented further that the process of dividing these large regions into sub-catchment or sub-regional coordination units goes only part of the way to achieving a management size appropriate to engage the community. In less immense regions, cross-regional arrangements with neighbours are proving a strong basis for joint projects.

### **3.2. Regional structures**

The results presented in this section inform evaluation criteria associated with the formal and informal structures that influence planning and management at the regional scale. These structural considerations include policy and governance arrangements; institutional alignment; roles and responsibilities; structures for engagement, funding and monitoring and for knowledge sharing. Aspects of these are also strongly related to process criteria, the results of which are reported in the following section 3.3.

#### **3.2.1. Coherent policy and governance (criterion 5)**

No Likert scale questions in the survey directly addressed criterion five. Responses to the open-ended questions provided insights on this criterion.

##### **Open-ended questions: coherent policy and governance**

In Queensland, there is a conviction that the RCGs have been a key strength of the current arrangements. These forums of state agency officials and regional body representatives were seen as successful in fostering improved relationships between State and Australian Government agencies and regional bodies (8). In some regions more than others they were also perceived to have stimulated more cooperative, cohesive and transparent working arrangements amongst the government agencies themselves in the region. Other comments were that regional working groups, including Queensland’s RCGs, despite their initial focus on developing regional NRM plans, are increasingly seen as forums for honest discussion and negotiation. In some cases it is said the split between “us” and “them” – meaning government and regional bodies - has been removed or is in the process of being removed within these forums.

Respondents saw several policy and governance aspects as not currently working. Foremost amongst these concerns was the difficulty in finding the balance between excessively bureaucratic structures and adequate corporate governance structures for regional bodies. This was seen to be a consequence of sometimes conflicting government requirements and community expectations for regional body governance. Regional bodies reported this was creating difficulties with sectoral representation, staff guidance and the ability to deliver. For example, excessive accountability requirements were seen to limit the regional bodies’ capacity to respond adaptively to pressing needs. It was also seen to reduce stakeholder participation in projects.

Respondents also identified several short-term improvements to governance arrangements that were needed. It was considered an “opportune time” by some regional bodies to streamline their business practices and sort through improvements in corporate governance. While acknowledging that individuality has its uses, greater consistency of regional business and operational systems between regional bodies was viewed to have merit. These views were paralleled in relation to government systems with suggestions that government too needs to make improvements in business practices within and between state agencies to reduce duplication including the introduction of more consistent funding procedures. See also monitoring return on investment, section 3.2.6.

### 3.2.2. Aligned institutions (criterion 6)

Responses to the statement ‘in the region, community, industry and government NRM priorities are well aligned’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=54)

More than half of the respondents (56%) clearly disagree with the statement that community, industry and government NRM priorities are well aligned within their regions. A lack of priority alignment seems to exist in particular for specific NRM issues and with certain stakeholder groups. For example, several respondents comment that the priorities of the mining industry are not aligned with those of the community and government, reflected in comments such as “coal mining enterprises are pursuing their economic agendas with very little regard for the rural community and the targets in the regional NRM plans” (r41). Similarly, several respondents report that recent vegetation management and water resource regulations have been received very negatively by the community, as they are perceived to decrease economic viability. Importantly, only one quarter (26%) of respondents believe that NRM priorities are well aligned. Most of the responses indicating strong priority alignment are from coastal Queensland regions.

#### Trend (n=53)

Half of the respondents (53%) believe that there is a positive trend in aligning community, industry and government NRM priorities. For example, one respondent states that “work has commenced on alignment, [is] not bad in this region and will get better over time with partnerships from implementation of actions” (r12). Conversely, one third of responses (34%) indicate that the situation has not improved much, whilst a small group of respondents [from WA rangelands] (9%) state that priorities are less aligned now than they were twelve months ago (r30).

#### Importance (n=51)

The clear majority of respondents believe that aligning NRM priorities is of critical importance (73%) or of some importance (20%). Several reasons are provided for this, including the need to avoid duplication, improving efficient use of funds and effort, and minimising mixed messages from different government agencies.

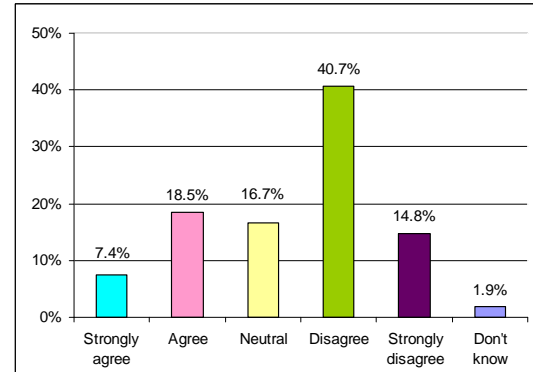


Figure 11a. Current situation in aligning NRM priorities

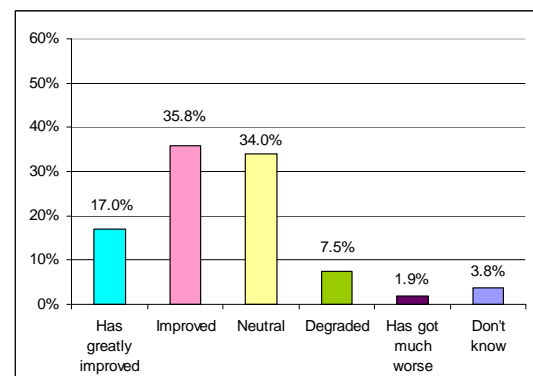


Figure 11b. Trend in aligning NRM priorities

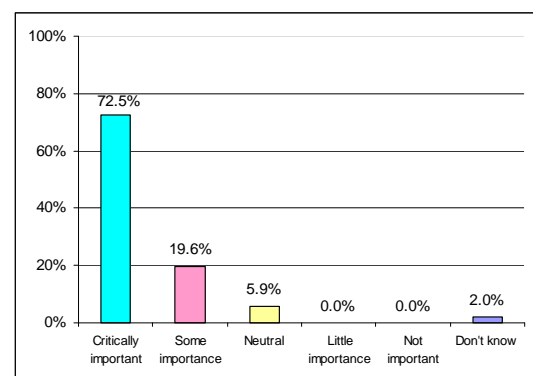


Figure 11c. Importance of aligning NRM priorities

**Open-ended questions: aligned institutions**

Several respondents identified that increased alignment generated from the regional approach is as a key strength of the process. They stated that this involve an increasing alignment of effort in government and community programs, interests and aspirations. This alignment of effort is seen to bring about less duplication, increased cost-effectiveness, better accountability and increasing partnership opportunities.

In other regions (5) a failure to align, value-add or coordinate State government and regional body efforts is identified as an aspect of the regional approach currently not working. As a result, ownership of a common regional NRM plan has not happened in some regions. Regional bodies are also aware that they may sit outside the decision-making process on significant issues affecting sustainable use of natural resources in their region.

Although relationships between regional bodies and local governments are generally considered to be improving, key areas such as defining partnerships and negotiating priorities still remain in need of attention (5). Regional body representatives point out that links with individual local governments are beneficial but getting the regional level interface with multiple councils is the main difficulty. Central to this is establishing or accessing workable regional networks. There is a recognised need to work at improving relationships with Regional Planning Advisory Committees where they exist (2) and a desire by regional bodies to develop a partnership rather than a client relationship with these organisations.

### 3.2.3. Roles and responsibilities (criterion 7)

Responses to the statement ‘roles and responsibilities for NRM in the region are clearly understood by all parties’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=53)

Nearly half of respondents surveyed disagree with the statement that roles and responsibilities for NRM in the region are clearly understood by all parties. A further thirty percent have a neutral opinion on the statement. Those that disagree commonly remark that there still is a significant amount of confusion and uncertainty about roles and responsibilities in many regions (r10, r11). There is considerable variation in the experience of different regions with respect to the role of local governments. Some regions perceive that “local government has a better understanding of their role” (r6), whereas others state that “the role of local government is still an area of great confusion” (r47).

#### Trend (n=54)

Most respondents agree that there is a positive trend in understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM in the region. However, both regional body and government agency respondents frequently state that “we still have a long way to go, but it is improving” (r7) or that “more work needs to be done on this, including developing a broader understanding of Regional Body role within agencies” (r44). Those respondents who stated they believed that the trend is degrading were mainly from WA Rangelands and the Northern Territory. For instance, one respondent commented that “there is still no clear direction from the government on who is doing what” (r28).

#### Importance (n=51)

The clear majority of respondents (96%) agreed that it is important for roles and responsibilities to be clearly understood by all parties. A few respondents gave reasons for why this is important, including, “clarity in roles and responsibilities avoids overlaps and duplications” (r2).

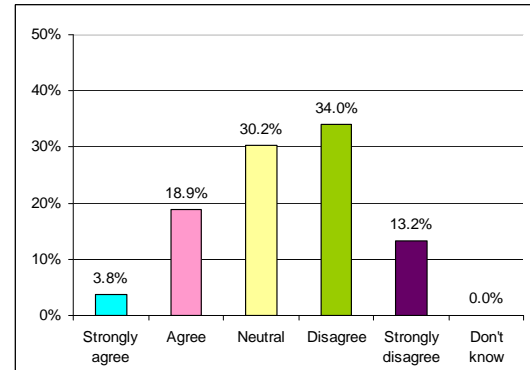


Figure 12a. Current situation of understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

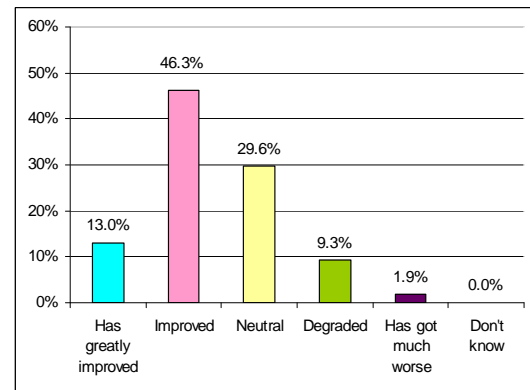


Figure 12b. Trend in understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

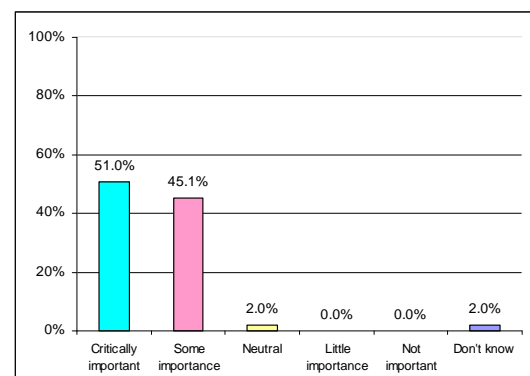


Figure 12c. Importance of understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

### **Open-ended questions: roles and responsibilities**

Regional body respondents closely tie notions of their identity to their key roles and responsibilities in the planning system. For example, many respondents (9) believe their non-government status is a particular strength allowing them to work with landholders or other organisations in a way not possible for a statutory body.

Stakeholder perceptions of regional body roles and responsibilities also generate difficulties for regional bodies. Several respondents identify that balancing potential conflicts between community roots and delivering government programs is a demanding responsibility (5), complicated by being seen as 'government' by community and as 'community' by government.

A number of respondents believe that this current stage, and the next 1-3 years, is an appropriate time to clarify and negotiate more clearly the roles and relationships amongst the many regional players (8), including the various levels of government, land managers and industry. Respondents state that relationships should, in a consistent way, work toward the development of 'true partnerships' where the strengths of the individual players are recognised and utilised. Other respondents believed the opportunity exists over the next 1-3 years to establish regional forums to discuss, negotiate, reach common agreement, and develop a strategic coordinated approach that aligns efforts and maximises impacts.

### 3.2.4. Participation and engagement structures (criterion 8)

Responses to the statement ‘the investment and implementation processes have been inclusive of all the key interests and stakeholders in the region’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=53)

Respondents had a wide spread of experiences within and between regions with participation and engagement structures associated with current investment and implementation processes. While nearly half of the respondents (49%) agree that all key interests have been included, one quarter are neutral and a further quarter disagree. Most responses suggest that the interests of some stakeholders are easier to include than those of others. For example, the mining industry is again frequently considered an ‘underrepresented’ stakeholder in the NRM process. Short time frames are also deemed to have restricted involvement in several regions with one government respondent commenting for example that “time pressures forced by the JSC have meant the task of conforming has taken priority over inclusiveness” (r50). Another respondent raises doubts about whether the regional process is “truly representative or just ‘power elites’ making the most noise” (r51).

#### Trend (n=53)

More than sixty percent (62%) of respondents indicate that the inclusion of all stakeholder interests in the investment and implementation processes is improving. Northern Territory respondents state that much still needs to be done in this area and several other responses from remote, extensive regions comment that the trend of including key interests is not as positive as in more intensive or densely settled regions (r27, r28).

#### Importance (n=52)

There is strong agreement amongst respondents that it is important to include all the key interests and stakeholders in the investment and implementation processes. Justifications provided by some respondents include: better opportunities to find effective and holistic solutions (r2) and involvement being necessary for improving “ownership and adoption” (r16).

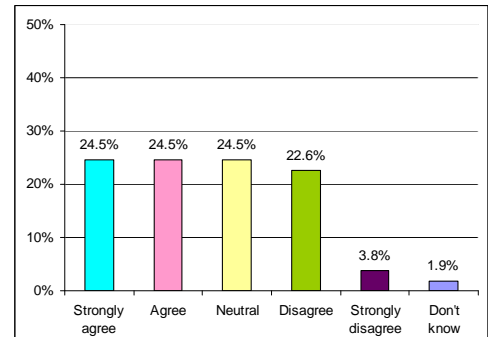


Figure 13a. Current situation: Inclusive investment and implementation

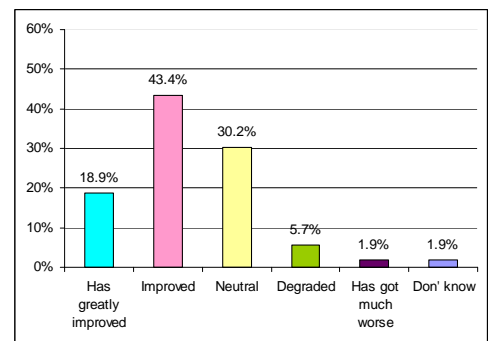


Figure 13b. Trend: Inclusive investment and implementation processes

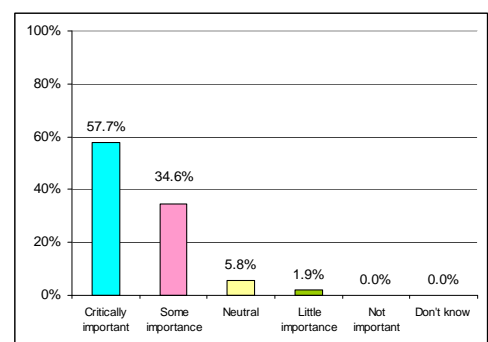


Figure 13c. Importance: Inclusive investment and implementation processes

### **Open-ended questions: participation and engagement structures**

Through the open-ended questions, respondents identified a number of key strengths of the regional NRM approach related to structures for participation and engagement.

Foremost of these is the establishment of the regional body or board as a “peak body” at the regional level to represent and promote NRM. Where diverse voices for NRM exist in regions, respondents see the regional body structure as bringing these voices together to present a unified vision of NRM in the region (15).

Stakeholder relationships are also frequently identified (8) as a key strength. The development and implementation of projects in particular are said to deliver strong ownership within the regional community (3), particularly where those projects deliver capacity building opportunities. Regional bodies identified a number of structures that were seen to promote effective participation and engagement of Indigenous people. These included the establishment of an Aboriginal Reference Group in one region, and Indigenous Land and Sea programs in others.

Some respondents indicated that the focus and design of funding programs may need to be reconsidered over the next three years in order to improve the participation of local government and industry sectors (2). RCGs were identified as an important structure for engaging government departments in working with regional bodies. It was noted, however, that these groups should be more inclusive of all agencies in the advisory process (4). From here benefits of involvement could be communicated throughout other agencies. It was also stated that an effort to improve the understanding of the RCG role within the JSC would improve JSC’s guidance and support to regions.

### **3.2.5. Regional resourcing is adequate (criterion 9)**

When asked about aspects of the regional NRM process that were not working well respondents provided some strong and commonly held views related to the financial and human resourcing of regional NRM.

#### **Open-ended questions: regional resourcing is adequate**

The first suite of concerns was related to the funding needs of large and sparsely populated regions (8) that received comparatively lower funding in conjunction with very high consultation/meeting costs (3). Respondents also identified there was still a significant time lag between announcement of programs and approved funds and contracts (2). There were also concerns that the transaction cost of securing funds is very high and the procedures complex rather than strategic and automatic.

Another major theme for regional bodies with management areas outside of the major population centres was the considerable difficulty to either find or retain the experienced professionals or local skilled staff needed to achieve the regional targets (10). Compounding factors, such as funding uncertainty, distance, lack of resources, and scarcity of skilled and experienced personnel, were reported to significantly reduce the capacity of regional organisations to meet their responsibilities. The issue of long term future funding and certainty of that funding is also discussed in criterion one, *stakeholder culture and commitment*.

Several regions (5) indicated that funding allocated even for high profile focus areas such as the Great Barrier Reef, is seen to be quite inadequate to achieve the outcomes desired by governments and stakeholders.

### 3.2.6. Monitoring return on investment (criterion 10)

Responses to the statement ‘processes are in place to monitor the effectiveness of management actions at the regional level’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n = 54)

A significant number of respondents (45%) do not believe that processes are in place to monitor the effectiveness of management actions. Many respondents report an absence of monitoring systems at the regional level for this purpose. Barriers to the successful implementation of these monitoring processes are reported as understaffing, remoteness and lack of baseline data. One response states that “existing monitoring programs are still fragmented, don’t effectively mesh and no one knows if they are sufficient for the needs” (r32). Responses that strongly disagree with the statement are, in the main, those of regional government agency staff. Those responses that strongly agree with the statement however are predominantly from Queensland regional bodies.

Regional body respondents from the Northern Territory and WA Rangelands generally provided a neutral perception of the issue reflecting the earlier ‘stage’ of the planning cycle in these regions.

#### Trend (n = 54)

Compared to other responses, the ‘trend’ in the monitoring of management actions at the regional level is not so clear. Even though 46% of responses agree that the trend is improving, another 40% indicate there have been few, if any, significant developments in the monitoring of management actions in the past twelve months. Common statements made include that this task “requires a lot more work”, “[is] only just starting” and “[is] getting there slowly”. One response for the SEQ region is particularly positive, indicating that “there are now many players interested in this area and it is clearly improving quickly” (r19).

#### Importance (n = 53)

More than ninety percent of respondents agree that it is important to develop processes to monitor management actions at the regional level. For instance, a respondent from a WA Rangelands region comments, “monitoring management actions is an area that we need to address before spending investment funds” (r24). Some reticence is also evident as one respondent is “unsure about the effectiveness of establishing complex monitoring processes when it is clear what needs to be done on the ground” (r39).

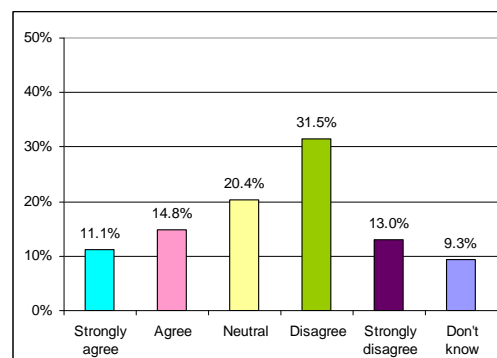


Figure 14a. Current situation in monitoring management actions

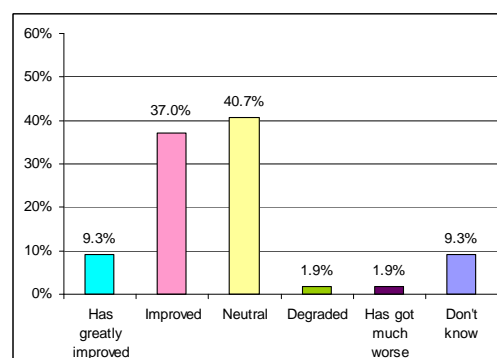


Figure 14b. Trend in monitoring management actions

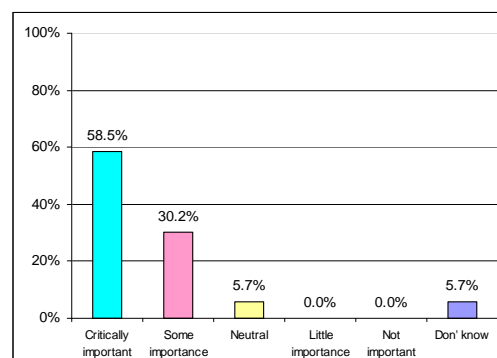


Figure 14c. Importance of monitoring management actions

### **Open-ended questions: monitoring return on investment**

In answering the question “which aspects of the regional NRM process are not working?” several issues around monitoring return on investment and expectations of investors were raised by respondents.

Regional bodies are confronting what some respondents consider to be unrealistic demands, whether over the timeframes and processes required by governments (5), over excessive red tape of accountability systems (4) and reporting requirements (4) or the larger demands for developing monitoring and evaluation systems (5). The expectation that a community-based program will deliver “quick” results and be able to report them in rapid fashion is seen as a constant demand on regional bodies’ time and efforts. There is a concern amongst some respondents that the timetables and agendas set by State and Federal Governments work contrary to principles of good community engagement (3) and are likely to bring disillusionment to a significant proportion of participants.

A number of respondents believe there is an excessive amount of reporting required, provoking concern that inevitably the casualties of these demands will be either the CEOs or the volunteer board members (4). For at least one region the move to a target-based approach to NRM is seen as impractical with significant difficulties in setting SMART<sup>7</sup> targets due to lack of data on resource condition states and trends and limited local capacity including within government.

While respondents consider it reasonable for governments and politicians to want to ensure that public funds are properly spent, reporting inputs and outputs is seen as a long way from reporting on real outcomes and NRM impacts (4). Some respondents’ perceptions are that performance reporting needs to move beyond simply reporting on activities and build a clearer and coordinated approach to monitoring, evaluation and reporting (4). One respondent indicated that those anticipating results, such as measurable improvements in water quality, however well-meaning, are being unrealistic.

The processes and requirements established for the review of RISs was also criticised as a “nonsensical process” in which the 1<sup>st</sup> ‘annual’ RIS review, some four months into the first year of implementation, was followed by a 2<sup>nd</sup> ‘annual’ RIS review only two months later (or 6 months into implementation).

Respondents also identified some common approaches they believed necessary in the next three years to make the regional approach more effective. This included a strong message of minimising any distractions to getting on with the job (12). Less obtrusive and more trusting investor oversight was seen as important to underpin future reporting and accountability arrangements. Other short term strategies nominated by respondents for improved effectiveness included greater recognition of regional body and partners’ efforts to date. Respondents suggested this needs to be based on strong monitoring and evaluation processes and to contain clear and targeted communication with investors (including politicians) concerning successful activities and outcomes (8). It was also raised that reporting on outcomes of the programs needs to be connected with State of the Environment or State of Region reporting and that both the message and the language of the reporting process be improved so they are meaningful to the average person.

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<sup>7</sup> See McDonald and Roberts (2006) SMART targets for Great Barrier Reef Catchments, *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 13(2), pp.95-107.

### 3.2.7. Structures for integrating knowledge and information (criterion 11)

Responses to the statement ‘effective data sharing and information management systems now exist in the region’s NRM’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=53)

A large number of respondents (43%) disagree with the statement that effective data sharing and information management systems exist in the regions. There are more people disagreeing than agreeing with the statement. Common challenges stated in responses include a lack of trust to support data sharing between stakeholders, lack of cooperation from the State government and lack of scientific research in certain areas (eg. Kimberley). For example, one Queensland respondent states “data sharing is a bit of a struggle. Questions arise about who owns what and who can sell for what price” (r11). Another respondent comments “despite much rhetoric and promises, effective data sharing and information management systems are still not set up in this region” (r21). However, around a third of respondents are more positive and discuss the successful introduction of data sharing agreements with various State departments (r22, r24, r44, r50).

#### Trend (n=55)

The majority of responses (53%) indicate that provisions for data sharing and information management systems are slowly improving in their regions. For instance, a Queensland respondent says “the State is slowly becoming more open and cooperative but still has a long way to go” (r13). A response from the NT reflects similar views, saying, “data sharing and information management systems are slowly being put in place. Websites have been set up, and networks have been created” (r27). Even though the majority believe there is a positive trend in data sharing, it is also important to note that 42% of respondents have not seen any noteworthy changes over the past twelve months. One respondent comments that “much has been discussed about this issue and promises made but there is so far little to show for all the talk” (r41).

#### Importance (n=54)

Clearly, most respondents (96%) believe that effective data sharing and information management systems are very important. A regional government agency response notes, “access to information is not as critical as having people who can make sense of it” (r49).

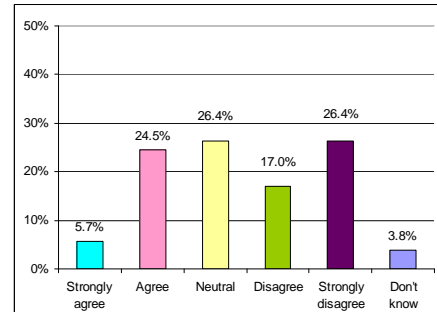


Figure 15a. Current situation of data sharing and information management

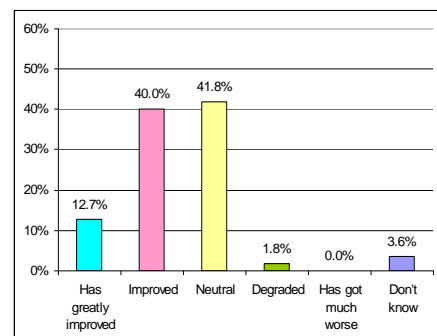


Figure 15b. Trend in data sharing and information management

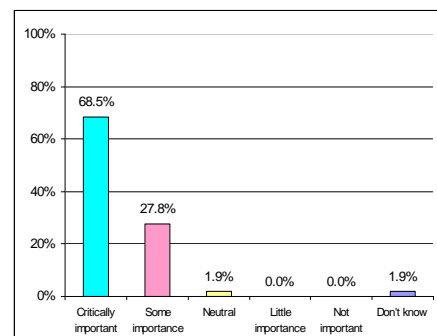


Figure 15c. Importance of data sharing and information management

### **3.3. Regional processes**

The results presented in this section are those that inform evaluation criteria associated with the appropriateness and effectiveness of processes that support planning and management at the regional scale. These include processes that support stakeholder capacity to participate, ensure procedural fairness is considered; support adaptive and responsive management; and, support links between scales and activities in the regions. Results presented in section 3.2.7 Integrating knowledge and values, above, have related process results that are reported here in 3.3.1.

### 3.3.1. Processes for integrating knowledge and values (criterion 12)

Linked to criterion 11, these results address process rather than formal structural aspects on the integration of knowledge and values. Results included are from two closed Likert scale questions from the survey. The first is on the incorporation of *Indigenous knowledge* through the regional NRM planning approach and the second on *local knowledge* incorporation more generally, as distinct from scientific or other sources.

#### Indigenous knowledge

Responses to the statement ‘Indigenous knowledge is highly valued and used when developing NRM projects in the region’ are reported below.

##### Current situation (n = 55)

Respondent perceptions on the value and use of Indigenous knowledge are somewhat divided. On the one hand 51% of respondents agree with the statement that indigenous knowledge is highly valued and used when developing NRM projects, whereas 27% disagree or strongly disagree that this is the case in their region. One respondent from a coastal region in Queensland states that “Indigenous engagement has been poor to date in our region” (r39). Common barriers to incorporating Indigenous knowledge were identified as language, remoteness, token gestures of white arrangements and prejudice by other stakeholder groups. The issue of appropriate and effective representation also surfaced with a number of responses suggesting “the factional nature of the Indigenous community has made it difficult to get meaningful input” (r16).

##### Trend (n = 55)

The trend in the use of Indigenous knowledge in regional projects is perceived to be largely positive in most regions. For example, one respondent from a rangeland region states, “Indigenous involvement is improving all the time. Being prepared to take time ... has shown rewards” (r8). However, even though the majority of respondents believe that progress has occurred, quite a significant number (27%) think that the situation has not changed much within twelve months.

##### Importance (n = 54)

Most respondents (80%) state that the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into the NRM process is important. Respondents from northern regions, in particular, comment on the critical importance of Indigenous knowledge since indigenous peoples are major stakeholders in those areas [this may explain in part the variation in ‘current situation’ and ‘trend’ data]. A Northern Territory respondent states, “Indigenous knowledge is highly valued for many reasons. This is especially the case since approximately 50% of the NT is indigenous land” (r27).

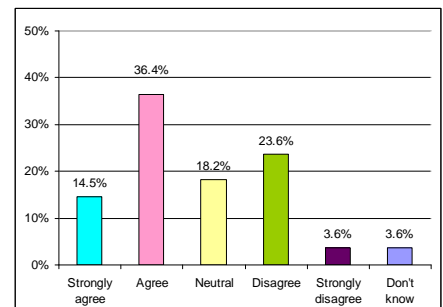


Figure 16a. Current situation of Indigenous knowledge

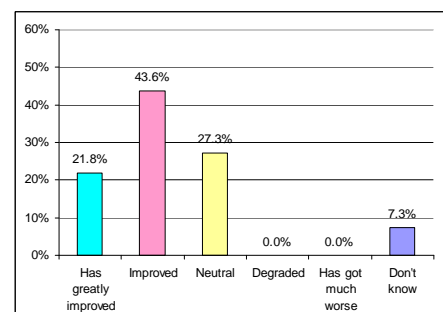


Figure 16b. Trend in Indigenous knowledge

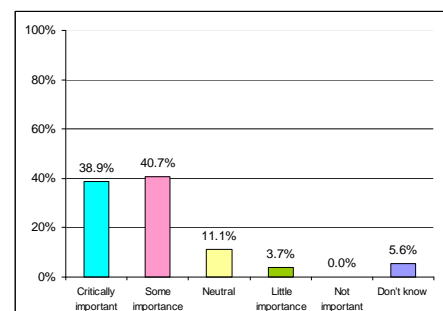


Figure 16c. Importance of Indigenous knowledge

## Local knowledge

Responses to the statement ‘local knowledge is highly valued and used when developing NRM projects in the region’ are reported below.

### Current situation (n=55)

There is particularly strong agreement that local knowledge is currently widely used and valued in designing implementation projects in the regions. Several regions identify benefits gained to date from this approach including improved ownership and relevance to local managers which, in turn, improves the longevity of the benefit gained from investment, “refined information and mapping [at the regional level] to help make decisions” (r21) and heavy reliance on local knowledge in light of poor availability of [scientific] baseline data. A small number of respondents note concerns of tokenistic involvement of local groups and the difficulty in putting the “rhetoric of local knowledge into practice” (r29). Sub-regional or catchment groups were also reported to be valuable in gaining access to this knowledge.

### Trend (n=55)

Some sixty-one percent of respondents indicate that the use of local knowledge is improving. Several respondents state that more investment is now going to local scale planning groups and that landholder and neighbourhood catchment groups supported through the regional process are valuable forums for local knowledge sharing on sustainable management practices. One response highlights some of the challenges regional bodies face, saying that despite the importance of local knowledge and good local networks that exist in the region staff turnover in the regional body coupled with an “increase in locals shifting out of the region [impacts on] continuity of performance, crucial for being able to maintain local contacts and hence access to their knowledge” (r23).

### Importance (n=54)

Again there is a strong commonality in the response from both regional government agency staff and regional body respondents with over ninety percent saying that local knowledge is of *some* or *critical importance* to project implementation in the regions including “contributing to target setting and the selection of priority areas [at the sub-regional level]” (r10). This is tempered, however, with several responses stressing the need to combine or balance local knowledge with ‘expert’ or ‘technical’ knowledge where possible (r11, r2) and potential problems with local knowledge tainted with self interest or restricting “innovative thinking” (r54, r55).

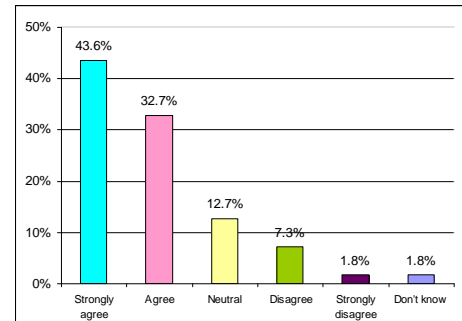


Figure 17a. Current situation: local knowledge

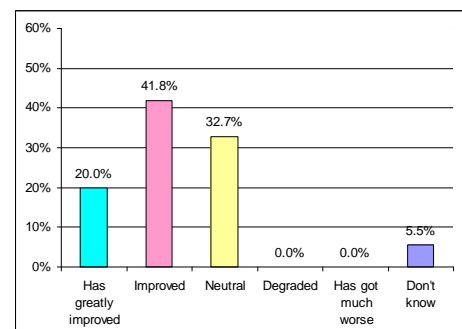


Figure 17b. Trend in local knowledge use

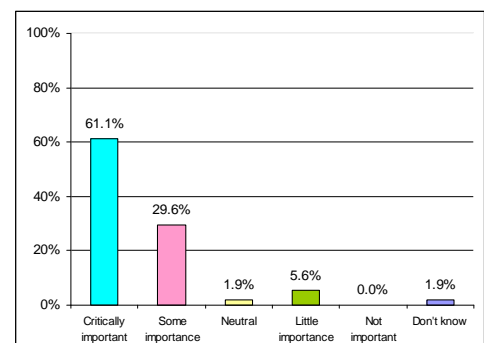


Figure 17c. Importance of local knowledge

### 3.3.2. Capacity to participate (criterion 13)

Two survey questions were used that address capacity to participate in the NRM planning and implementation process. The first question relates to the ability of all stakeholders to participate, while the second question focuses specifically on the capacity of local government to participate.

Responses to the statement ‘all interests and stakeholders in the region currently have the capacity to participate in NRM planning and implementation activities’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=55)

Responses indicate that there is currently a wide discrepancy in different stakeholders’ capacity to participate both between and within regions. Several respondents cite remoteness, distance, cultural differences and literacy as major constraints. In regions such as the WA Rangelands, NT and Southern Gulf, available resources are considered not sufficient for meaningful participation over such extensive areas (r29, r37, r23). The pace of the planning process is also thought to have hampered capacity to participate for rangelands stakeholders (r33). Traditional owners and conservation groups are reported to be having greater difficulty to participate, while the mining sector is perceived to sit largely outside the process. Interestingly, many of the respondents link stakeholder ‘capacity’ to regional body communication, extension and engagement efforts or have the view that representation on the NRM boards demonstrates sufficient capacity and involvement in the process.

#### Trend (n=55)

The majority of respondents believe that stakeholder capacity to participate has improved in the last twelve months. A further third (29%) indicate stakeholder capacity in their region is unchanged from twelve months ago. Some 17% of responses show poor current capacity and that there has been no net improvement over the last twelve months in their region.

#### Importance (n=54)

The vast majority of respondents (89%) indicate that the capacity of all interests and stakeholders to participate in NRM activity is of some or critical importance to successful regional approaches. However, respondents also imply that some stakeholders may not see it necessary, politically expedient or financially advantageous to participate. As such stakeholders may seek other points of influence outside the regional process (r55, r35, r38). This was reported to include some government agencies that do not consider regional NRM as core business (r 42).

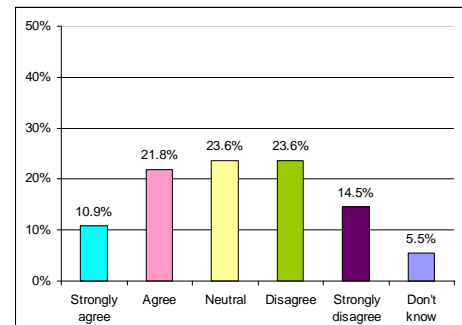


Figure 18a. Current situation in capacity to participate

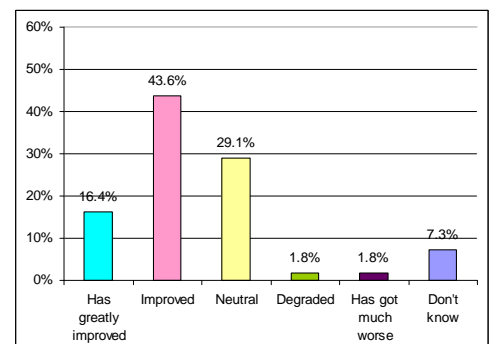


Figure 18b. Trend of capacity to participate

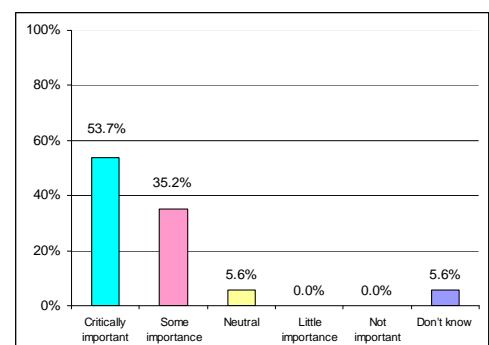


Figure 18c. Importance in capacity to participate

Responses to the statement ‘**local governments** in my region are making a valuable contribution to the regional NRM process’ are reported below.

**Current situation (n=54)**

Contributions by local government is one of the more variable issues surveyed. One quarter of responses indicate local governments are not currently making a valuable contribution to regional NRM efforts and a further 19% are neutral on the issue. This is significant given the perceived importance of local governments (see below). Respondents identified Cook Shire in Cape York, Douglas Shire in the Wet Tropics, and Darwin and Litchfield local governments in the NT as valuable contributors. The lack of local government areas outside of towns and urban areas in the NT, however, was noted as a barrier specific to that jurisdiction. Generally, contribution by this sector is still considered patchy or highly variable within and between regions and could be a lot stronger. Some of this variation is considered due to capacity and resourcing available to councils, level of interest and high transaction costs of participation.

Approaches in place for working with local governments include representation on regional boards, working through regional organisations of councils or other ‘clusters’ of local government, co-location and joint appointment of staff for mutual benefit. There are also signs, however, that “local government involvement at the Board level has not translated into effective collaboration to develop projects and implement operational changes such as stormwater work” (r45).

**Trend (n=54)**

Nearly two thirds of responses (65%) indicate that there has been notable improvement in local government contributions over the last twelve months. Most of the remaining responses indicate that contributions have remained at the same level over the last twelve months.

**Importance (n=53)**

There is a very high level of consensus on local government contributions to regional NRM processes with 64% saying it is of critical importance and a further 29% of some importance to regional efforts. Many responses point to the *potential* contributions local government partnerships might or could provide to address NRM issues in regions.

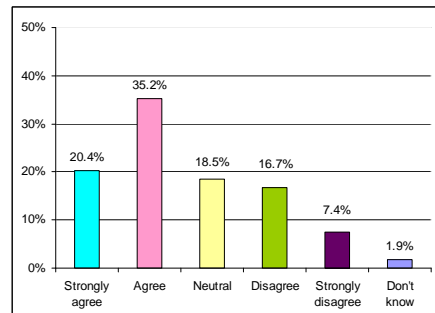


Figure 19a. Current situation - local government contribution to NRM

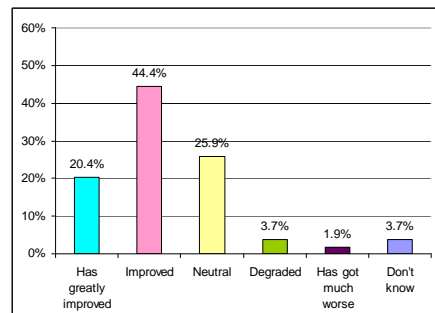


Figure 19b. Trend in local governments contributions to NRM

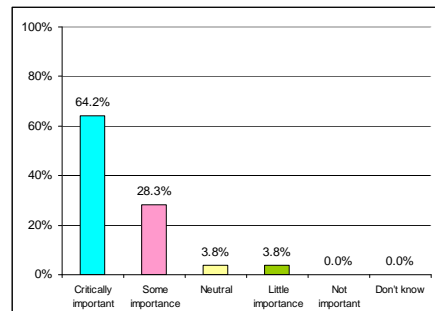


Figure 19c. Importance of local government contribution to NRM

### **Open-ended questions: capacity to participate**

Individual capacity to participate is a strong theme from the open-ended questions. There is general agreement amongst respondents that it is the attributes of the people involved in regional NRM (including staff, volunteers and Board members), which is their greatest strength (17). Qualities of passion and enthusiasm are rated highly (3) although in other regions this is interpreted as motivation and commitment by capable and skilled staff (5). In a number of regions professionalism and professional relationships are seen as hallmarks of the more mature organisations while in others, leadership by a board of suitably experienced people with a well-recognised and respected chair are examples of “people strength”. For some respondents there is strength in the diversity of interests brought to the process by their management committee members.

Not all regions have experienced strong community input however. Northern Territory respondents, for example, indicated that Territory and Australian governments are the primary contributors at this point in time as the major providers of assistance in plan development and project design.

A further example of different patterns of participation between regions is evident in some respondents identifying local government (3), State government, sector groups at a regional (as opposed to a State) level and Indigenous groups as key partners in their respective regions. Other regions nominate new partnerships with research and educational institutions as a particular strength. Elsewhere, consistent engagement across the range of Traditional Owners, although reportedly improving, is identified as a particular challenge (2). Section 3.2.7 on the use of ‘Indigenous knowledge’ is also relevant here.

### 3.3.3. Procedural fairness (criterion 14)

No Likert scale survey question was linked directly with the concept of procedural fairness. Instead, aspects of procedural fairness are discussed in ‘capacity to participate’ and ‘regional resourcing is adequate’ (see sections 3.3.2 and 3.2.5).

### 3.3.4. Adaptive and responsive processes (criterion 15)

Responses to the statement ‘experiences from doing NRM are talked about and shared between groups and stakeholders in the region’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=55)

Responses indicate lesson sharing between stakeholders and regional groups is currently active (65%). However, some 26% of responses suggest that lesson sharing is not as widespread or valued as it might be. There are quite different interpretations from respondents of what the statement entails, ranging from the development of communication tools, such as newsletters, through to more participatory and co-learning approaches to problem solving. Some of these modes include effective “landholder grapevines” and active Landcare, sub-catchment or LCDC networks (r18, r33); conferences and forums for specific managers e.g. Indigenous rangers conference and forums involving catchment coordinators in a region (r47). Several responses state that experiences arising “from serious project work” (r23) or “on specific issues at project field days” (r33) are the most useful. A few regional body respondents cite that “cross-regional communication is a key part of our day to day business” (r11), that “cross fertilisation” is the best aspect of their region’s approach (r15) and that in Queensland, the Regional NRM Groups Collective provides a good mechanism for this.

#### Trend (n=55)

Lesson sharing amongst stakeholders has reportedly been improving (62%) in many regions over the last twelve month period. A large proportion of the remaining respondents (33%) state it has neither improved nor degraded during the same period. A number of responses imply that at this stage of the planning process there has not yet been sufficient time for lessons to be identified with “less than six months into implementation this is not clear yet” (r21) and that “*doing* NRM is something the group is yet to achieve” (r35).

#### Importance (n=53)

Most respondents (89%) indicate that the sharing of experiences between stakeholders or groups in their region is important. Benefits associated with this are noted as improved efficiency of decision-making, avoidance of repeating the same mistakes (r2, r16, r17) as well as promoting regional body’s or a program’s success (r5, r7).

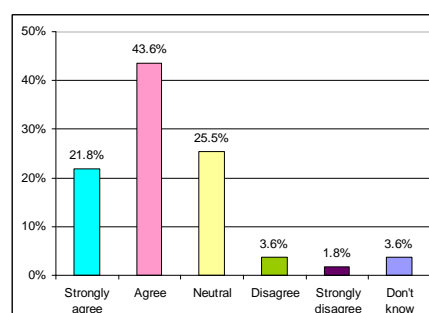


Figure 20a. Current situation of learning culture and networks

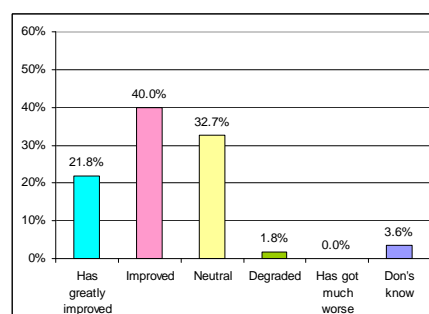


Figure 20b. Trend in learning culture and networks

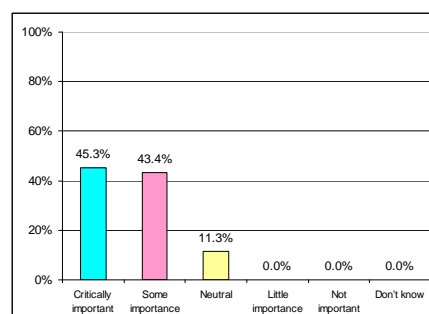


Figure 20c. Importance of learning culture and networks

### 3.3.5. Linkages between scales and activities (criterion 16)

The use of this criterion in this second benchmarking phase deals primarily with linkages between regional and local level processes. Responses to the statement “local, catchment and other sub-regional groups are linked to, and supported by, regional level processes” are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=51)

Nearly two-thirds of responses (63%) indicate regional groups currently support and are effectively linked to local, catchment and other sub-regional groups or processes. Several government respondents, however, emphasise ‘wide variation’ between and within regions in their area (r38, r40, r57). Other respondents underline the value and effectiveness of sub-regional networks in the Fitzroy, Mackay, and DCQ regions, where catchment scale organisations are perceived as being essential for both engagement networks and implementation delivery (e.g. r6, r7, r10, r12, r13). Responses also state these links are strongest where a good ‘history’ of cooperation between local, catchment and regional efforts exists or where regions “remember their origins” (r47). Nearly one-quarter of responses were neutral (22%) or disagreed (9%) with the statement. Several respondents, particularly from remote regions (NT, WA, SWNRM), indicate that these linkages are “still coming together”, that the links “haven’t had time yet to mature” with “considerable work to do to develop a proactive approach in this area”. Some responses comment on the tendency to establish new networks rather than support existing ones in some regions.

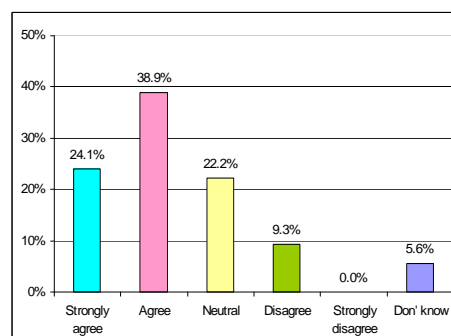


Figure 21a. Current situation of links with sub-regional processes

#### Trend (n=54)

Several respondents note current barriers to effective links between scales in their region. These barriers include a lack of formal structures, a perceived lack of cooperation from some local groups and low capacity of local government. Insufficient staffing has until recently in some regional bodies hindered the development and support for these networks (r24) and difficulties in resourcing sub-regional representatives to travel long distances to attend regional activities (r32). Over half of the responses (53.7%) indicate that links to subregional groups and processes are improving. One third, however, indicate the strength of these relationships has not changed in the last twelve months and a further 7.4% believe they have actually degraded. For example, one respondent points to concerns over exclusion of catchment based efforts from one regional process as the catchment based process is seen to represent interests not ‘core’ to the regional bodies image of its community.

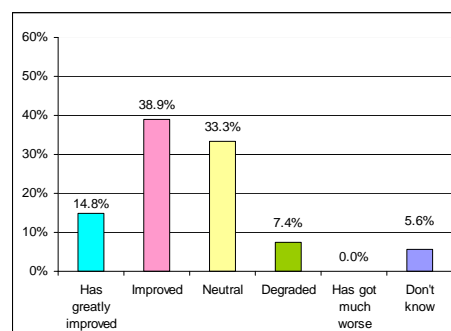


Figure 21b. Trend of links to sub-regional processes

### Importance (n=52)

Several respondents note that in many regions local Landcare based activity relies heavily on support from regional groups. Benefits cited include these links help capture local priorities into the regional process; the regional approach helps “mitigate competitive ‘my patch, your patch’ mentality” between local areas. One view in the WA Rangelands region indicates local or catchment-based groups have remained effective *because* they have stayed separate from the regional process.

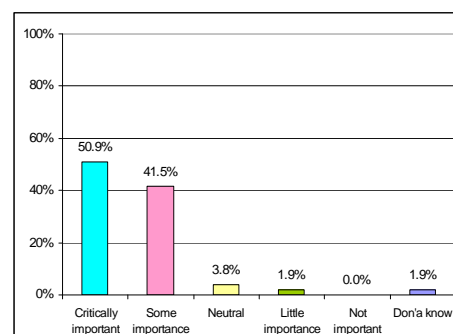


Figure 21c. Perceived importance of links with sub-regional processes

### Open-ended questions: linking scales and activities

Respondents identified several factors relevant to this criterion in their responses to the open-ended question “which aspects of the regional approach are not working”.

A large number of respondents stated that whilst marked improvements have been made, the coordination or integration with landholders and groups operating on-ground remained a challenge (14). Related responses included the perception that many landholders were not well engaged during the plan development period and are still largely unaware of the role of regional bodies. Other respondents stated that Landcare groups are struggling in their region, with progress relying on the faithful few. Even where relationships between regional bodies and Landcare groups are improving, respondents stated that some individual Landcare groups have not re-established contact with regional bodies, or where they have, the role of Landcare groups in the regional process remains problematic (3). In some areas there is variable support from the Landcare groups for the regional process depending on historic levels of “ICM success”. From some regional bodies’ perspectives, the sheer size of their region often makes attention to all catchments and catchment groups challenging (2).

Other respondents commented that sub-regional structures have not effectively been established in their region (4). Reasons given for this included poor formalisation of relationships, unhelpful sub-regional “politics” or poor communication due to the size of some regions.

Respondents also identified short-term needs to be addressed in the next 1-3 years for regional NRM to be successful. This included a recognised need to integrate with processes such as the Regional Growth Management Frameworks in Queensland and steps to improve alignment of regional body activities with the current institutional reforms and government business. There was also a recognised need to maintain or increase efforts in community, industry, local government and Landcare group involvement.

The outcomes criteria *connected and effective institutions* (section 3.4.2) provides some insight on progress to date on regional and inter-scale links between activities.

### 3.4. Regional Outcomes

Two open-ended questions in the survey dealt explicitly with respondent perceptions of outcomes from the regional NRM process. The first of these asked respondents what had been the major achievements to date from the new regional arrangements in their region. The second question asked respondents what outcomes they expected to see from regional NRM in the longer term. Responses to these questions specifically, and other open-ended questions in the survey where relevant, are presented here against the three outcomes criteria in the evaluation namely, improved social capital of planners and managers; effective and connected institutions; and, improved resource condition. The results of two closed Likert scale questions are also presented for effective and connected institutions.

#### 3.4.1. Improved social capital of planners and managers (criterion 17)

No Likert scale question dealt directly with outcomes associated with improved social capital of planners and managers. However, a number of Likert scale questions in other sections of the results are relevant here. These include *stakeholder culture and commitment* (3.1.2.), *integrating knowledge and values* (3.3.1.), and the discussion on strategic investment in *effective and connected institutions* (3.4.2.).

##### **Open-ended questions: improved social capital**

###### *Pride, recognition, ownership and trust*

When asked about significant achievements to date from the regional NRM process a key theme emerged of significant pride in having the community's recognition for the achievement of a well-consulted, representative, community-owned NRM plan. Respondents believed this helps create a “We can do it” approach to NRM. There is pride amongst respondents in the regional body being accepted by the community and in the services now being offered by the regional body. Some respondents believed regional bodies have achieved a “lead agent” role for NRM in their communities. Respondents also reported similar factors as key strengths of the regional approach. In particular, the sense of accomplishment and confidence generated by establishing regional organisations, well-regarded NRM plans and RISs that reflect community support and provide a solid basis for future activities (8).

Other significant achievements identified by respondents included building awareness in the community of best practice, engagement opportunities and building consensus amongst the wide variety of stakeholders (5). Respondents noted that land managers are now being recognised for achieving good practice and not just being criticised for perceived negative impacts. Good ownership by the community of projects was also reported. In some regions, such as DCQ, this has had to overcome perceptions of historical failure following the break-up of the Lake Eyre Basin community process.

Respondents are also proud of their efforts in bringing together disparate stakeholders or interests such as irrigators and pastoralists, as well as other groups that in the past have rarely talked with each other. Some perceptions were that particularly in the rangelands, finding common ground is very new. Other groups brought together through the regional process were said to include conservation with development groups, corporate industry with community groups, and, in Mackay Whitsunday, the “harmonisation” of three Integrated Catchment Management groups in that region.

###### *An aware, informed and involved community*

A significant number of respondents (20) signalled that expected longer term outcomes from the regional NRM delivery were increased awareness, understanding, and capacity of regional communities to manage their natural resources.

For some, this increased awareness applies explicitly to a recognition of the value of natural resources to the region (3); for others, it means that sustainable management of natural resources does not happen automatically, but needs to be purposefully and skilfully achieved (4); and yet for others, it is an awareness that sustainable management of natural resources underpins the sustainability of communities.

The provision of good information to the regional community (6) is necessary to bring about a greater appreciation of sound resource management practices. For some (5) this means an increased capacity for resource management – to be able to undertake NRM activities and to understand the complexity of NRM business. Examples of this included dealing with cumulative effects of management decisions over time and in some cases investing heavily in community education.

Respondents also anticipated that increased engagement would, in the longer term, lead to greater community participation in management and decision-making (13). In addition, respondents anticipated better involvement of Traditional Owners with Indigenous communities more involved and recognised as holding a key role in the management of regional landscapes.

Respondents are clear that achievement of expected outcomes is dependent on maintaining some level of continuity, including continuity of program rules and objectives and of ongoing funding and support (3). Such continuity is seen as vital in developing the required trust (3) within the community (particularly within the landholder community), in achieving ownership of issues and in developing confidence to achieve NRM outcomes and support generational change.

### 3.4.2. Effective and connected institutions (criterion 18)

This is a key criterion in terms of measuring progress of the regional approach at this point in time for regions between planning and early implementation. A major underlying assumption and goal of the regional NRM approach is that it improves the effectiveness and efficiency of NRM through more strategic investment and action. This also relies on some degree of enhanced connectedness between institutions and organisations in regions. The emergence of new partnerships under the regional approach is one useful indication of this connectedness. Respondent perceptions of both improved strategic action and new partnerships are presented here.

#### Strategic on-ground action

Responses to the statement ‘taking a regional approach to NRM has made existing on-ground activities in this region more strategic’ are reported below.

#### Current situation (n=53)

The majority of respondents (64%) agree that the regional approach has resulted in more strategic action “on-ground”. However a notable proportion of respondents (30%) believe it has had little or no effect to date in this respect. Gains widely reported include greater efficiency of effort and dollars spent. Other regions indicate an improved ability to focus on priority gaps and locations in their region where, for example, there is “slower uptake of practices”. Regional plans, investment strategies and subsequent regional programs of work are seen as fundamental to achieving a strategic

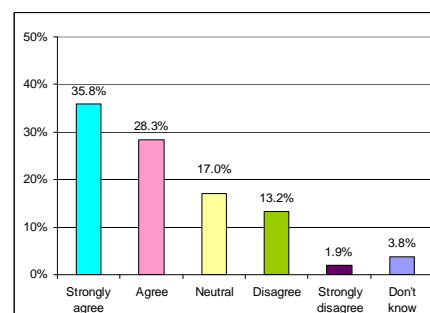


Figure 22a. Current situation - strategic on-ground activities

focus. Regions report that several new strategic ‘flagship’ programs are developing in regions. However there are also cases where opportunistic projects are accepted on a marginal “no regrets basis” (r45).

**Trend (n=53)**

Over two thirds of respondents (72%) believe on-ground works have become more strategic - to varying degrees of improvement - as a result of the regional approach. A further twenty percent (21%) indicate that there has been no change in the strategic nature of on-ground investment during the last year. Earlier and some existing projects are considered the product of a “scatter gun approach” (r 23) or are driven by statutory obligations or by available funding from “less strategic programs such as Envirofund and NLP” (r41). There are still concerns cited in several responses, mainly by agency staff, that there “may still be some inertia keeping on-ground delivery within pre-existing comfort zones” (r55). Comments are also put forward about making existing projects on weeds and pests in many regions more strategic through on-going improvements. Again the issue of timing is a strong theme with several respondents from NHT regions, in particular, saying that there are few actual on-ground projects up and running yet, this will pick up over time and “become more significant by year three of implementation” (r 21).

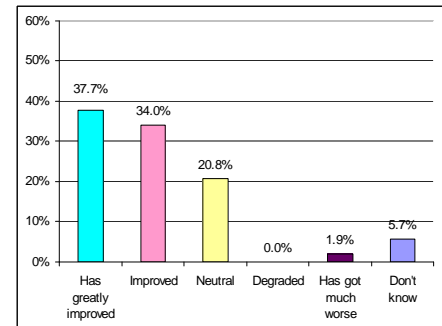


Figure 22b. Trend in strategic on-ground activities

**Importance (n=52)**

Nearly all respondents (96%) believe that the ability of the regional approach to improve the strategic value of on-ground activities is of critical or some importance. However, caveats are offered from some respondents, who say that achieving equity across stakeholders, different assets or locations is more important or at least an equally competing consideration in some regions. Other respondents indicate they are limited by still trying to [spread] the limited funds across a very large area (r40).

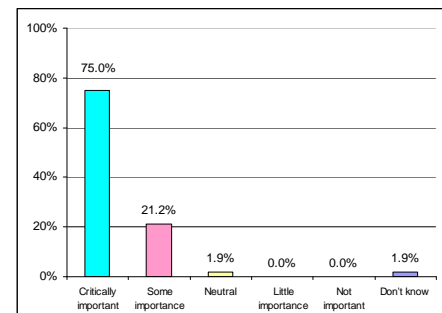


Figure 22c. Importance of strategic on-ground activities

**New partnerships**

Responses to the statement ‘new partnerships between industries, government and communities are emerging to address NRM challenges in the region’ are reported below.

**Current situation (n=54)**

Close to three-quarters of respondents (74%) agree/strongly agree that new regional partnerships are emerging to address NRM challenges in regions. Partnerships now exist to address NRM issues as diverse as viable Indigenous land and sea management centres (r2), urban water use efficiency (r25) and water quality outcomes in the Ord irrigation area (r33). Partnerships have also emerged in response to “overarching drivers” such as the Reef Plan or farm management systems approaches (r40). Regional bodies also help broker new partnerships between sectors in their region (e.g. pastoralists and irrigators in the East Kimberley).

Responses clearly indicate that adopting a practical project or issues-based partnership is an important success factor. For example, QDPI&F indicate they have recently received “very positive response from regional bodies” on proposals for joint investment and industry involvement (r 47). One regional body respondent indicates that the effectiveness of partnerships is improving as “[the regional body] works with a range of partners and is learning more about negotiating with them to get projects actually implemented” (r10).

**Trend (n=54)**

The distribution of responses for the trend of developing partnerships shows that most responses (72%) consider partnerships are improving between industry, government and community in their region over the last twelve months. Most of the remaining responses (20%) indicate a neutral view, suggesting maintenance of existing partnerships has occurred during this time. Several responses also state these partnerships are still ‘developing’ or it is still ‘early days’ and that more and better partnerships will emerge as projects have a chance to get up and running. Significantly, no responses state partnerships have degraded in the last year. However, one regional body in north-west Queensland highlights that “government presence in the region has waned alarmingly in the past year and this has been a significant set back [to establishing partnerships]” (r 23).

**Importance (n=53)**

Again there is very strong agreement that new partnerships are central to the success of regional arrangements from agency and regional body responses. Some of the benefits noted from new partnerships include improved capacity of regional bodies to broker external funding and in particular, purchase agency extension skills, especially in grazing land management (r13). Partnerships are also said to improve understanding of issues between partners and, in turn, generate new opportunities for collaboration.

**Open-ended questions: effective and connected institutions**

A large body of the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey relate to outcomes associated with effective and connected institutions.

Organisational capability

There is no doubt in the minds of respondents that strong progress has been made evidenced by approved regional NRM plans and functioning RISs (14). The articulation of regional aspirations, targets and actions within these plans is seen in itself a significant advance. This, however, does not apply to all regions. For example, Cape York at the time of the survey had only developed their region’s NRM plan to a draft stage. In the WA Rangelands, respondents indicated that plans and investment strategies had been developed but that “just leaves them at the starting blocks”. Respondents also stressed that even though some plans are still in draft form, this still represents a significant achievement.

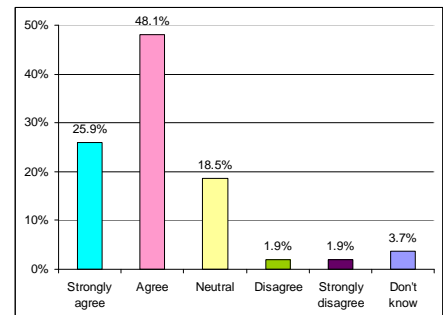


Figure 23a. Current situation in regional partnerships

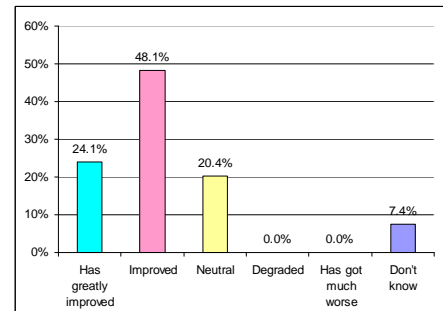


Figure 23b. Trend in regional partnerships

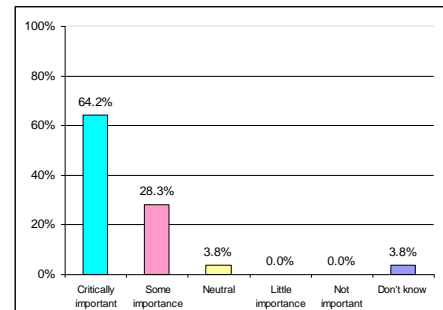


Figure 23c. Importance of new regional partnerships

Respondents considered the smooth and transparent operation of their regional NRM boards as a significant outcome achieved to date, often including that these boards now operate with the confidence of the stakeholders in their region (6). Several respondents emphasise the achievements in corporate governance and project management skills of these boards and their capacity to support skill development in the local population (3). For some respondents, the organisational structure of their regional body is seen as a significant strength. Others proposed that a small organisation with an independent chair improves the efficiency of decision-making. One respondent stated that a small organisation, managing investment through partnerships, is to be preferred because it poses no threat to existing deliverers of NRM. Two respondents commented that their company structure is a particular strength.

When asked “what needs to happen in the next 1-3 years for NRM in your region to be successful” respondents offered the following:

- For a small minority the task remains to finalise the regional NRM plan and investment strategy, or to significantly revise these in order to provide sound guidance for strategic investment into the future; and
- To achieve stable and productive arrangements, respondents from many regions stated staff recruitment and management remains an area in need of attention (10). Challenges range from attracting and retaining volunteers with the right mix of skills and experience for the Board (6) and Board Executive positions to recruiting competent and dedicated staff to ensure a stable and complete staffing structure required to fulfil the organisation’s functional needs.

There is, however, a sense of frustration amongst some respondents over the lack of on-ground implementation of NRM plans to date. Amongst these respondents there is a feeling of being caught in the planning cycle, of too much focus on organisational processes (i.e. who represents, who votes, who sits at the table) and on the brink of implementation and aware of multiple opportunities, there is some indecision over what the next step should be.

There is a strong sense amongst respondents that the best course of action for regional bodies is to get on with the business of delivering regional NRM (10). This is seen to include tangible outcomes that can win over remaining detractors, validate the new way of doing business, justify expenditure and build on the trust that has been extended to them by the wider community. In most cases ‘runs on the board’ refers to delivering either on-ground project outcomes or meeting resource condition targets, but in either case, there is a real sense of urgency to demonstrate the organisations’ merit and capabilities.

#### *New relationships and partnerships*

Different regions report that one of their greatest strengths is being able to build on historic relationships with key stakeholders in Landcare and catchment management groups. In other regions the opposing view is held in that the new structures have allowed some regional bodies to start with an almost clean slate, unencumbered by previous obligations and relationships.

Better cross-government and whole of government cooperation is reported as a significant achievement of the regional NRM process to date. Respondents stated this has brought greater alignment of effort in service provision (3). Partnerships are said to be forming with State government, local government and industry (4). Indeed it was felt by several respondents that there were innovative and effective institutional arrangements with local governments being developed in some regions (5) and with industry partners in other regions. Respondents equally anticipated further improvements in participation of a range of organisations, including State agencies in regional NRM in the future (10).

This expectation of improvements extends also to stronger engagement and partnerships with local government (5) and Aboriginal land councils, and with industry, including the peak industry bodies (7). Ongoing development of successful partnerships with the NRM research sector is also anticipated (3).

Respondents make a clear distinction of benefits from “alignment” rather than “integration” with State and Australian government programs (9). Alignment is framed as the combined application of a complementary range of tools - i.e. regulatory approaches, incentives and voluntary action. Respondents admit however that this needs respective responsibilities to be more clearly defined.

#### *Mobilisation of the community*

An “impressive” mobilisation and engagement of the community in response to long-standing NRM problems is widely reported (16) by respondents as a significant outcome to date. For example, one respondent stated that “in eighteen months we have had over 500 land managers involved in sub-catchment planning”. It was also noted that Grazing Land Management (GLM) workshops are showing new faces never involved in the past and providing greater benefit for participants in those workshops. Other respondents report that major sub-catchment programs are attracting new participants in Landcare (2). Some respondents believe that this [increased] mobilisation is related to the ability of the region to attract funds for remedial work. The arrival of these funds and “getting dollars on the ground” has had a significant impact (5).

#### *Finding new solutions*

The regional planning process, respondents indicate, has not only brought together new partnership groups but it has resulted in new approaches to previously intractable problems, such as indigenous engagement and participation (4), or adopting integrated approaches to reducing the diffuse source pollution impacts on the Great Barrier Reef.

#### *Expected benefits of a strategic and coordinated approach*

Several statements by respondents point to the current and longer term benefits they expect to see from adopting a strategic approach to on-ground investments and coordination of a regional approach. Central to this coordination of effort is the clear delineation of purpose provided in the RISs.

Respondents state that their capability to plan strategically will also improve over time (6). Focusing on addressing priority regional issues (4) within investment programs is seen as essential to tackle pressures of land degradation, pests and weeds, riparian protection, water use efficiency and water quality. In addressing these it is often stated that current efforts in areas of sub-catchment planning to guide implementation (2) are now more targeted than earlier approaches.

A belief held by several respondents is that a coordinated approach between stakeholders will avoid duplication of effort and build on each other’s strengths (4). Over time it is expected this coordination will also help clarify common priorities and achieve outcomes sought by multiple initiatives beyond the regional NRM plan, such as the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan and/or regional economic development.

Another expected benefit from adopting a more strategic approach is securing the necessary long-term and ongoing funding at the regional scale (5). Opinion, however, is split fairly evenly as to whether financial independence from government(s) or long-term funding commitment from government(s) is preferable. Regardless, government funding, particularly cash funding, is valued for its ability to leverage two to three times that amount in products and services at the regional level.

### **3.4.3. Improved resource condition (criterion 19)**

From the open-ended questions, respondents also identified a number of expected, longer-term benefits from the regional NRM approach to do with the condition of priority natural, social, cultural and economic resources in their region.

There is a recognition that while landscape change is desired it is unlikely that major discernible improvements, say in water quality, will be achieved in the life of the current funding programs because of the delays in implementing on-ground activities and the bureaucratisation of the whole process. In addition, the inherent lag time between improved management and resource condition response is recognised as a major factor here.

Tangible evidence, in the form of significant on-ground works happening throughout the region (7) was seen as an indicator of improved resource condition by some respondents. Others (8) specify expected impacts of those on-ground works, as enhanced water quality, protection and maintenance of biodiversity and the attainment of sustainable production systems in the longer term.

Another group of respondents framed environmental improvements as leading to more sustainable development outcomes. This revolved around the increased uptake of more sustainable practices, whether through the adoption of improved farm, land or water management practices (11). Some respondents stressed that these improvements will flow directly from the implementation of activities in regional NRM plans (5). The uptake of new land management technologies was highlighted as a key aspect of this, particularly in rangelands regions. There was also a recognition that longer term cultural or attitudinal change is needed to see sustainability thinking become “normal” business practice.

Respondents also widely drew connections between adoption of improved management practices in agricultural enterprises and the perceived flow-on benefits for the social and economic well-being of landholders and their regional communities.

## **3.5. Summary of criteria attributes by relative performance**

Table 4, below, summarises the state and trend responses for closed Likert scale questions presented in section 3.0. These responses are for attributes of the regional planning system that inform the evaluation criteria.

The different attributes of the regional planning system are ranked using natural breaks into three categories. These categories distinguish between areas that are currently working well, areas that show a variable performance within and between regions, and areas that are reported as in a poor state across most regions. These scores reflect the perceptions of regional performance by both regional NRM bodies and State and Territory government agency officers involved in regional NRM arrangements survey in November 2005.

There are some noteworthy patterns in the groupings of attributes. Those attributes grouped as working well, by and large, tend to be aspects of the regional approach for which regional bodies have a clear operational mandate, that is, tapping into local knowledge, brokering partnerships, linking with local level groups and sharing lessons on NRM between stakeholders. These are also functions regional bodies can progress somewhat independently from government or other third parties. Conversely, those attributes grouped as poorly performing tend to be those that require more complex, multi-party negotiations or rely on considerable input from third parties over which regional bodies may have limited influence.

These include clear roles and responsibilities amongst different managers, regional monitoring and information systems, and, priority alignment between community, government and industry interests.

Importantly these scores and their relative ranking should be interpreted in the context of the ‘stage’ of planning most regional bodies found themselves at during the survey, that is a transitional period between plan and RIS development and early implementation.

Interestingly, the trend for all attributes is either positive or has not changed much over the past 12 months. There is no attribute for which the trend is, collectively, reported as negative.

**Table 4. Summary of ‘state’ and ‘trend’ responses from closed survey questions**

Attributes of regional planning system	State (%)			Trend <sup>c</sup>
	Agree <sup>a</sup>	Neutral	Disagree <sup>b</sup>	
<b>Currently working well</b>				
Local knowledge used and valued	77	13	9	↑ <sup>d</sup>
New regional partnerships are forming	74	19	4	↑
Linkages between regional and local processes	67	24	10	↑ / - <sup>e</sup>
Learning culture and networks exist	65	26	5	↑
<b>Variable performance within and between regions</b>				
Stakeholder collaboration is common practice	67	11	22	↑
On-ground activities are more strategic	64	17	15	↑
Improved acceptance of NRM issues	61	21	18	↑
Contributions by local governments are valuable	56	19	24	↑
Stakeholders recognise the triple bottom line	55	27	15	↑ / -
Indigenous knowledge is used and valued	51	18	27	↑ / -
Regional investment and implementation processes are inclusive	49	25	26	↑ / -
<b>Currently in poor state</b>				
All stakeholders have capacity to participate	33	24	38	↑
Regional data sharing and information management systems are in place	30	26	44	↑ / -
Monitoring of management actions is adequate	26	20	45	↑ / -
NRM priorities are aligned between institutions	26	17	56	↑ / -
Roles and responsibilities are clear and defined	23	30	47	↑ / -

<sup>a</sup> summation of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses

<sup>b</sup> summation of “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses

<sup>c</sup> interpreted trend using median response (if greater than 50% of responses indicated “improved” or “greatly improved”)

<sup>d</sup> the upward arrow (↑) means that there is a positive trend in the development of the relevant attribute

<sup>e</sup> the hyphen (-) means that the development of the relevant attribute has not changed much over the past 12 months

## 4. Key findings and lessons

The previous section presents results from the informant survey against the evaluation criteria. This section, drawing on that data outlines key findings from this second phase of the evaluation and discusses implications for regional NRM planning practice, policy and knowledge in northern Australia. Regional NRM has evolved at different rates across regions and jurisdictions in the north. Still, findings presented here can be seen as the state of play following the main planning stage and the transition stage to early implementation.

### 4.1. Identity, roles and responsibilities

By early 2005 regional bodies in northern Australia were beginning to establish a presence and profile in their regions. Many regional bodies associate this growing legitimacy with the consistent flow of funds for regional works and the ability to broker meaningful partnerships or co-investments. However, consistent with findings from the first *Benchmark Report*, the legacies of past NRM arrangements and partnerships continue to affect the success of the current regional NRM planning initiative. Translation of earlier groups into the design of new regional arrangements was undertaken more successfully in some regions than others.

There is a sense of ambiguity felt by some regional bodies as being perceived by government ‘as community’ and by some sections of the community ‘as government’ entities. Despite the confusion this creates for some stakeholders, many regional players state that this helps them operate more effectively in the space between community and government. More importantly, it allows regional bodies to develop an identity as NRM partnership brokers. The non-statutory status of regional bodies is a distinguishing feature of regional arrangements in northern Australia that also supports this ‘brokering’ role. Many regional bodies view maintaining a non-government identity as a key asset which they believe lets them work with landholders or other organisations in a way not possible for a statutory body, responsive to particular regional needs.

Closely linked to issues of regional body identity are roles and responsibilities, and hence implied and actual contributions, to the regional outcomes. As part of their transition from plan-development to implementation, roles have changed markedly for many regional bodies in the last twelve months. This change has also influenced the way regional bodies interact with their partners, stakeholders and co-investors. The evaluation emphasised a number of regional body roles as key strengths in their approach:

- Responsibility for regional coordination between initiatives and scales in the region;
- Building awareness, promoting and informing best practice NRM in the community;
- Providing a variety of opportunities for community engagement in NRM decision-making and ownership of those decisions; and,
- Providing a structure – the regional body – that builds consensus amongst a wide variety of disparate stakeholders or previously antagonistic interests in the region.

Despite a lack of formal authority, contested legitimacy in some government spheres and claims of insufficient resources, regional bodies appear to have been remarkably successful in the regional coordination role in particular. This role includes regional body staff actively facilitating coordination at local and regional levels (e.g. organising forums, networks, connecting people to resources, and connecting like-minded activity).

Regional bodies also help focus effort and broker NRM funding from a range of government and non-government sources.

Not all emerging roles for regional bodies are uncontested or equally valued across regions however. For example a number of regional bodies are developing increasing technical capability in the areas of data management, mapping and monitoring. In some cases this is making cooperation with resource management agencies easier. In others it is causing unease over perceived competition in areas historically considered government's domain.

Although improving in most regions, the clarity of new roles between regional bodies, government and industry is reported as the most poorly performing attribute of the regional system (see Table 4) and is seen as a serious concern by NRM planners and managers. In the first phase of the evaluation, the role of local government in NRM arrangements in Queensland was found to be highly problematic. Some 18 months on there is still a mixed sense of progress in some regions and little or no progress on this issue in others. Encouragingly, clarification and negotiation of roles and relationships is a priority for most regional players during the next 12 months. There is also evidence to suggest that getting into the actual business of implementation and project negotiation has greatly helped regional bodies, governments and stakeholders identify their respective contributions (see section 4.4. below).

An approach that emphasises “alignment of effort” in regions rather than “integration” is proving beneficial in regional body and government discussions. ‘Alignment’ is framed in these discussions as the combined use of complementary approaches (e.g. regulatory, incentives and voluntary action) based on different organisations core strengths. However, clarification of respective responsibilities is necessary in progressing this.

## **4.2. Governance issues in regions**

Some aspects of existing governance arrangements are not working. Foremost amongst these is finding the right organisational structure for regional bodies that can balance perceived “excessively bureaucratic” program requirements, corporate requirements, and community expectations for regional body governance. For example, regional bodies perceive that excessive accountability requirements limit their capacity to respond adaptively to pressing needs and reduce stakeholder participation in projects. There is agreement between both state government and regional body respondents that there is considerable scope to improve and streamline business practices in both sets of organisations.

Broadly speaking, a significant outcome of the regional NRM process to date has been stronger cross-government and whole of government cooperation, particularly at the regional and macro-regional level<sup>8</sup>. This is likely to improve across northern Australia as regional arrangements become more established in the Northern Territory and Western Australia and with time as regional bodies continue to learn from partnership experiments with their neighbours and government agency collaborators. Respondents stated this cooperation has brought greater alignment of effort in service provision amongst government agencies. Structures such as Queensland's RCGs provide greater coherency of policy advice and state agency governance arrangements, which has in turn improved relationships between regional bodies and state agencies.

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘macro-regional’ is used to imply groupings of regions, such as those which exist under the RCGs in Queensland

Regional bodies, by and large, believe these forums are important for engaging government departments. These forums do not yet adequately engage key agencies that have transport, infrastructure and social and economic development responsibilities.

The ability of regional bodies to self-sustain financially in the longer term – independent from government program funding – continues to be a focus of discussion at the regional level. Opinion is split as to whether financial independence from government(s) or long term funding commitment from government(s) is preferable or indeed achievable. Regardless, government funding, particularly cash funding, is highly valued by regional bodies for its ability to leverage products and services at the regional level.

### **4.3. Impacts of different jurisdictional approaches on regional outcomes**

Due to the staggered nature of signing program and funding agreements between state, Territory and Australian governments, arrangements in each of the three jurisdictions studied are at different stages of maturity in the planning and investment cycle. It is important to highlight that each of the three jurisdictions have also adopted quite different approaches in delivery of the regional NRM model. These different approaches – primarily related to the degree of centralisation of planning and investment activity - appear to have significantly influenced the program and planning outcomes in those areas.

In relative terms the approach adopted in the Northern Territory is the most centralised of the three jurisdictions studied. Control of the early planning and engagement stages has been largely embedded within, and dependent on government officers for delivery. The rationale for this approach included limitations of the then regional body's structure – as a non-incorporated entity – and a belief this would minimise transaction costs of establishing additional community infrastructure where stakeholders were already believed over-stretched. This decision restricted the then regional body – the LCNT - to a stakeholder reference group role or external client for the INRM plan. The LCNT, designed principally as an advisory structure, also had difficulty in fulfilling its NRM body role as a decision-making body. The initial strategy however of using an agency-based planning team to reduce pressure on the community, produced a lack of access to and ownership of the planning process and plan amongst sectors and subregions. This 'mismatch' between structure and role of the LCNT was the principal driver in the formation of the new NRMB (NT) Inc. in late 2005.

Difficulties in the Northern Territory were also exacerbated by the decision to plan for the NT as a single investment region under the NHT. This appears to have had significant consequences such as marginalisation of key stakeholders operating at actual 'regional' scales. There were similar experiences in Queensland regions where for example in Cape York, a greater degree of central control exerted by State and Australian Government interests correlated with poor progress in finalising planning and investment arrangements in that region. In essence the NRM region becomes a tug-of-war between external interests to the detriment of local determination.

The Kimberley subregion forms one of four subregions under the Western Australian Rangelands NRM region. Under this framework the Kimberley subregion team coordinated the engagement, sub-regional plan development and priority setting in their sub-region. In this sense the engagement and planning processes were more localised or distributed than in the Northern Territory for example. However, the main decision-making and investment functions still resided with the Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group structure.

Despite sub-regional representation at the Rangelands table, the Kimberley subregion was left, in effect, with limited political efficacy in the final investment decisions. This also created a lack of certainty of the future role of stakeholder engagement networks, such as an effective Aboriginal reference group, established during development of the subregional plan.

The lesson here from the Kimberley is that devolving and resourcing planning and engagement functions on a ‘short-term’ basis without decision-making power leads to frustration, uncertainty, and high social transaction costs for planners and stakeholders alike. It simply does not allow stakeholders to recognise sufficient return (financial, social or material) to justify their considerable involvement and trust in the planning stage.

The Ord River Catchment as a NAP region had a more defined planning area, tighter scope, and an established NRM planning network in the form of the Ord Land and Water initiative. In contrast this region was able to exert greater local control and autonomy in their regional investment and project development phases, maintain momentum of activity and leverage significant government agency and industry buy-in.

Queensland, in relative terms, adopted a more devolved approach to the regional NRM planning process. Arguably a more inherently risky strategy that State’s NRM regions were given greater flexibility in their organisational and governance arrangements. As a result some 15 different sets of arrangements developed at different rates across Queensland. The decision by the State Government to support regionally relevant models did not come without considerable tensions. These tensions included the continual testing of governance, accountability, policy, representation and priorities issues between regional bodies and state and Australian governments leading up to plan accreditation and during the investment planning phase. The benefits of this devolved and consequently diversified model is being realised in regional investment processes that are emerging at more socially and ecologically relevant scales. While providing strength in ‘local’ ownership of the process this diversity, however, does still cause some headaches for agencies, state level industry and business groups seeking consistent engagement approach across several regions. There is consensus building amongst regional bodies however to move towards greater consistency and efficiency in financial reporting and other aspects of their corporate governance, despite their diverse modes of operation.

#### **4.4. The importance of “doing” and getting on with the job**

Regional bodies stated their preference to minimise distractions over the next year and get on with the job of NRM delivery. This is nested with a real sense of urgency amongst regional bodies to demonstrate their merit and capabilities as implementers. The benefits from implementing on-ground works are seen to improve the condition of regional assets but also act as a focus to improve regional NRM partnerships. In reporting on their progress regional bodies are seeking to shift their emphasis from ‘input-output’ reporting to actual outcomes and lessons from projects.

Adopting this approach will, in the views of regional bodies, win-over remaining detractors, validate the new way of doing business, justify expenditure and build on the trust that has been extended to them by the wider community. There is also a sense of frustration in some regions with the lack of on-ground implementation of NRM plans to date. This frustration is linked to feelings of being caught in the planning cycle, of too much focus on organisational process (i.e. who represents, who votes, who sits at the table) and in a small number of cases indecision over what the next step should be.

The process itself of developing tangible projects of common interest has proved critical to the development of functional and effective regional arrangements. Rather than being a pre-requisite for project development there are several cases where collaboration and belated stakeholder buy-in – including commitment of in-kind resources by agencies – has succeeded through jointly developing practical, asset focused projects<sup>9</sup> in regions, where the lengthy up-front regional planning process had failed to secure that buy-in. This is not to overlook the benefits generated by the broader planning process itself, such as a clearer picture of potential collaborators priorities, culture, resources, and, the knowledge to design the project to meet strategic regional needs.

Scant suitable scientific information to direct the design of S.M.A.R.T targets remains a challenge for NRM in many regions of northern Australia. Information from informal reviews of on-ground actions and information-exchange within and between sectors has instead been used to guide many NRM priorities and actions to date. Accommodating different types of knowledge and NRM aspirations (e.g. Indigenous knowledge) in these informal reviews has proved challenging in some regions. The importance of doing and then sharing experiences on major project outcomes is recognised by regional bodies as critical for adaptive management of natural resources in those landscapes. The use of local and Indigenous knowledge in designing NRM actions and projects, and contribution of scientific information and monitoring systems is discussed below.

#### **4.5. Partnerships and regional priorities**

Under the regional NRM model, new partnerships are emerging and continue to strengthen. To illustrate, some 34 separate partnerships were reported as currently emerging or being actively sought with local government, Aboriginal Land Councils, the ‘NRM research’ sector and agri-industry peak bodies. Regional bodies have positioned themselves as a broker of new partnerships between industry groups, agencies, researchers and community sectors in their region, and, are learning more about negotiating with a range of partners to get projects signed and implemented. The expansion of scope in some regions, such as the Ord, to include rangelands areas adjacent to the irrigation area has provided a platform for new partnership discussions between pastoralists and irrigators which link previously separate parts of the landscape.

Community, industry and government NRM priorities are not well aligned in regions. Priority alignment in coastal regions of Queensland is stronger however and most likely driven by defining water quality pressures and related policy drivers in those regions. This general lack of alignment has not limited the development of new partnerships. Interestingly, new regional partnerships do not depend on both parties sharing the same values or management priorities. Instead, the glue in the partnership is largely where mutual benefit can be found or where there is mutual interest in the management of a particular asset or pressure. The evaluation indicates that aligned priorities are more likely to be a longer-term product of partnerships than a starting point. This has significant implications in regions where potential partners are prescriptive about the values to be protected in a landscape or part of a landscape as a precondition for co-investment.

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<sup>9</sup> In this case the term project is used to mean both a discrete and broader program of targeted investments but with a defined outcome, location and participants

## **4.6. Links to local, catchment and other sub-regional groups**

Regional players consider the mobilisation of the community to address long-standing NRM problems as a significant outcome and strength of the regional approach to date. One region provided the example that “in eighteen months over 500 land managers [are now] involved in sub-catchment planning”. Links between regional level management, local, catchment and other sub-regional networks are considered to be in place and supporting sub-regional activity by two thirds of survey respondents. These sub-regional networks are highly valued by regional players for both engagement and implementation delivery.

Whilst marked improvements have been made since the previous *Benchmark Report*, working with landholders and other on-ground groups remained a challenge in several regions. Linkages in regions such as the Northern Territory, WA Rangelands, and South West NRM, were reportedly still forming. The regional process was criticised in some cases for trying to develop new, duplicate and poorly connected networks rather than supporting or further strengthening existing ones. The success or otherwise of historical association under previous arrangements continues to influence current relationships between Landcare and regional bodies. Respondents also referred to “hangovers from the plan development” process where the role of Landcare groups, for example, is yet to be clarified. Regional body support for local groups was also affected by factors such as distance and travel time in large regions.

## **4.7. Who is - and isn't - at the NRM table in regions**

The nature and level of involvement of different stakeholders and interests varies greatly across the northern planning regions. There is also great variation in the involvement of a given sector, such as local government, within and across regions. As such there is no core set of interests who are involved or represented in every region to the same extent. This makes generalising evaluation findings difficult. In large regions with dispersed populations, planners believe it is harder to engage effectively. For example, available resources are considered by planners in regions such as the WA Rangelands, Northern Territory and Southern Gulf, as insufficient for meaningful participation of even key stakeholder groups.

### Local Government

A low rate of participation of local governments in the plan development phase was widely reported in the first *Benchmark Report*. Regional bodies note significant improvements in local government contributions to regional NRM over the last twelve months. However, contributions are still considered “patchy” in most regions with strong sign-up from some local governments and not others. Finding or developing the right scale or mechanism to engage groups of local governments in their region is a common challenge. Cook Shire in Cape York, Douglas Shire in the Wet Tropics, and Darwin and Litchfield local governments in the Northern Territory were identified by regional bodies as valuable contributors. Generally, local governments are well represented on NRM boards. Nonetheless, involvement to date has rarely translated into projects or operational changes to local government business.

### Indigenous, conservation, agri-industry and mining interests

Regional bodies report that some stakeholders or interests experience greater difficulty participating in the regional process than others, namely Traditional owners, Indigenous interests, and conservation interests. The mining sector is another stakeholder perceived to sit outside the “influence of NRM process”, as “underrepresented”, or “problematic” for regional bodies. These views are similar to those reported during the first phase of the evaluation in 2004-5.

This suggests that long timeframes are required to address this, or, there is a lack of direction on how to resolve these issues. More so, the situation is indicative of the capacity of regional bodies to adequately engage those diverse interests.

There is enough evidence, however, to say that regional bodies are becoming more successful in working with Indigenous and agri-industry interests. A success factor here has been to take a longer-term view, beyond the immediate engagement needs of the regional body to investing in a longer-term relationship. At the same time however regional bodies recognise the need for agri-industry stakeholders in particular to receive some short-term practical benefit from their involvement. This is something that many regions have struggled with to date, given the lengthy nature of the planning and investment process. It is obvious that some regions are still negotiating appropriate involvement arrangements with Indigenous people, whereas other regions have well established and effective relationships.

#### *Valuing Indigenous and local knowledge*

Patterns in the contribution of stakeholder knowledge to implementation also provide some insight into stakeholder involvement. The reported use of Indigenous knowledge in project design and implementation activities, not surprisingly, reflects the success or otherwise of Indigenous engagement arrangements. Use of Indigenous knowledge is valued more highly in regions with a large proportion of Indigenous people or large areas of Aboriginal land. There were few practical examples provided however of how or why the use of this knowledge was desirable. How Indigenous stakeholders' contributions can be best used, and exactly why regional bodies are seeking Indigenous involvement is not always clear.

Compared to Indigenous knowledge, there was much stronger agreement on the value and use of 'local' knowledge to inform the design of actions in regions with specific examples provided of how this was occurring and what practical benefits it generated. The value of local knowledge – generally interpreted as land manager knowledge – is often raised in the context of poor availability of suitable scientific information for implementation in regions. Factors threatening to reduce regional body access to this knowledge in savanna regions included staff turnover in regional bodies, ineffective subregional links to pastoral Landcare groups and similar networks and the rise in absentee land managers, raised as a particular concern in the Southern Gulf.

### **4.8. A more strategic investment?**

An instrumental assumption and goal of the regional NRM approach is that it results in more strategic investment and action. There is a general view amongst most survey respondents that this indeed had been the case for on ground efforts in their region. Of the remainder, timing of the evaluation is a factor here with NHT regions, in particular, saying that there were few on-ground projects up and running yet and they expected this to pick up by year three of implementation. Arguably counter to this goal, the larger savanna NHT regions in particular view achieving equity in the distribution of funds between stakeholders or locations an equally important consideration to strategic outcomes. This position was strongest in regions which reported they had limited funds and believed that stakeholders were owed some return for participating in a difficult planning process.

Defining what exactly is a strategic investment is highly subjective. In a narrow sense this may mean investing: where the science tells us, using the most effective and cost-efficient intervention or interventions. This definition, however, requires a major assumption about the adequacy of regional NRM information and monitoring systems, formal and informal, to firstly direct, and then evaluate the impact of that investment.

## **4.9. The failure of formal data and information systems**

The state of regional information systems was a major constraint identified in the first phase of the evaluation, which noted that during late 2004 - early 2005:

“Roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions were largely undefined or unclear at best...state and national agencies were responsible for long-term resource condition monitoring, [however] coherent programs were not evident...[with a] consequent lack of consistent information to measure resource condition changes and the success of interventions” (McDonald et al 2005b p.9)

Some eighteen months later, and with actions underway in regions, systems are still not yet in place to monitor the effectiveness of these actions. Government agency staff are more optimistic about the value of existing systems – including the introduction of data sharing agreements in some Queensland regions - than regional bodies who report difficulties in securing the required numbers of skilled staff and the baseline data necessary to make real progress on this front.

In section 3.5. above, Table 4 shows the relative performance of different aspects of regional NRM as determined from survey responses. Three of the five attributes grouped as performing poorly are major structural aspects of program and regional planning mechanics, namely: 1) sound and accessible information and data management systems 2) systems for monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of management actions; and, 3) alignment of priorities across institutions. It is not surprising then that clarity of roles and responsibilities between organisations is also performing poorly in relative terms. These aspects become tightly related when it comes to determining or negotiating conflicting investment priorities on: what to monitor and where; who manages the monitoring infrastructure; and, who pays for it.

In Queensland’s Great Barrier Reef (GBR) catchments there are clear and significant policy drivers, such as the RWQPP, for coordinated monitoring and actions for NRM. Yet even at this macro regional level the formation of an additional structure – the Reef Catchments Partnership – has been required to make progress, where there has been little substantive progress to date. There is a paradox here that programs, such as NHT, developed to fundamentally address issues of community capacity are currently hamstrung by the lack of progress by resource management institutions and data custodians whose primary roles are aligned with resource assessment and monitoring responsibilities.

## **4.10. A reality check on expectations**

Any initiative the scale of regional NRM planning has several instrumental assumptions about how that initiative will work. These assumptions also underpin the expectations of investors and participants about the types of outputs and outcomes that can reasonably be expected. This evaluation has identified several of these assumption-expectation links that require re-thinking if realistic appraisal of progress to date in regions.

### *Regional target logic*

There are two significant gaps in knowledge here that currently make assumptions about likely changes in resource condition largely speculative. The first of these is the paucity of empirical data on the cost-effectiveness of specific management actions or interventions. The second concerns the relationship between achieving a series of management action targets and their aggregate contribution to long-term regional resource condition targets.

This is not to suggest in any way that targets should be abandoned, but if the regional NRM model is to work on the basis of adaptive management, the causal relationship between actions and outcomes needs to be more explicitly tested through the implementation phase. This must be done however in a supportive and deliberate culture of “learning as you go”, rather than a punitive or conditional culture where ‘payments’ to regional bodies are tied to measurable resource change. The key considerations should in fact be: i) evidence that the best bet approach was employed, and then, ii) clarity on what was learnt from that experience to inform future efforts.

#### *Quick results in variable landscapes*

Regional bodies are confronting what they consider to be unrealistic investor expectations that regional bodies will deliver “quick results” and then report these in rapid fashion. Many of the program and performance reporting requirements in place are, however, viewed by government and regional body participants alike as hurdles rather than vehicles to providing investors with feedback on progress and outcomes. Neither does this expectation account for the likely contribution of immature monitoring systems in regions discussed above.

While landscape change is desired by regional bodies, they recognise it is unlikely that major discernible improvements, say in water quality, will be achieved in the life of the current funding programs. In this setting the value of meaningful surrogate measures, such as delivery of significant on-ground works throughout a region, is being adopted as a useful indicator of progress. In the meantime the continuity and considerable social capital required for these changes has been slow to be reflected in the political climate characterised by uncertainty of on-going government support<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Planning for what?*

Regional bodies and architects of NAP and NHT programs agree that the fundamental deliverables from the investment within the life of the program are the improved uptake of sustainable land and water management practices, a more informed and engaged community and securing the foundations for long-term cultural change in natural resource management.

When asked about expected longer term benefits from the regional NRM approach, natural resource managers in northern savanna or western rangelands regions, draw strong links between adoption of sustainable management practices in agricultural enterprises and the perceived flow-on benefits for the social and economic well-being of landholders and their regional communities. The rationale implicit in NAP and NHT agreements sees social outcomes (e.g. capacity building) as a means to achieve resource asset ends. The perspective in regions however, in effect, flips the program logic and positions the attainment of improved NRM as a vehicle for long-term sustainability of regional communities. This is further underlined with survey respondent perceptions that the overriding drivers in the minds of their regional stakeholders are economic. Savanna regions see sustainable livelihoods as fundamental to achieving sustainable landscapes.

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<sup>10</sup> Political commitment to the regional NRM model in Queensland was not voiced formally until early 2006 e.g. – after the evaluation data was collected

## **5. Future needs for viable northern regional NRM**

The evaluation of regional arrangements for NRM suggests three core needs must be met if the regional model is to remain viable in northern regions of Australia, and more specifically, if natural resource managers and their actions are to be effective. These core needs are:

1. Recognise and incorporate stakeholders aspirations for sustainable livelihoods in the design and delivery of natural resource management;
2. Increase focus on cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems that inform local learning and regional decisions
3. Ensure structures, scales and scope of planning is appropriate in large northern regions.

### **5.1. Sustainable livelihood aspirations**

A key factor influencing effective regional NRM in the north is the diversity of economic, social and cultural values that permeate resource use and management decisions. The current program arrangements for NAP and NHT restrict regional bodies' ability to adequately integrate and reflect these values in targets and actions.

The challenge for regional planners is to design interventions that address livelihood aspirations and re-affirm northern communities as regional assets, not simply as means to achieve resource condition outcomes. Addressing livelihood aspirations involves designing interventions that achieve *multiple* outcomes (i.e. economic, social, cultural and environmental). Where engagement and investment processes have adopted this approach, implicitly or otherwise, regional bodies have made good progress.

For program designers and policy makers this means linking NRM objectives to broader regional development efforts. Currently at ground level in regions, program rationale is interpreted in just this way - using improved NRM practice as a vehicle for long-term sustainability of regional communities and industries. More explicit alignment with regional economic development initiatives will also create efficiencies in developing regional reporting systems and supporting coordinators and facilitators working in regions.

Poor sign-on from major service providers, such as local governments, and income generators, such as the mining and tourism sectors also reflects limitations in NAP and NHT program design and delivery. Mining and tourism are viewed by regional bodies as 'pressures' to be managed not as likely partners or contributors to solutions. In some cases government agencies may need to actively facilitate involvement of the mining sector where community networks are unable.

### **5.2. Cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems**

The dynamic nature of northern landscapes - characterised by multiple uses, climate and ecosystem variability - creates uncertainty for NRM delivery. This is coupled with the challenge of getting sufficient information to set realistic targets, design actions and appraise success. As such the relationship between management actions and the improvement of resource condition is not well understood and difficult to demonstrate in the short term. This raises a fundamental question about how to define and measure cost-effectiveness of implementation activity in regions.

In this setting, greater focus on testing the links between actions and outcomes adaptively is needed. There is also a need to accept that achievement of certain actions can suffice as surrogate measures for achieving outcomes in many instances. Coupled with this is a need to improve current efforts to capture and apply local knowledge and experiences to strengthen action-outcome understanding, and, to inform the selection of indicators and criteria to judge success of interventions. Recommendations to this effect, arising from the evaluation findings, have been made by the research team to the *Natural Resource Policies and Programs Committee*:

“The critical need at this step of the regional planning cycle is to build capacity of research providers to partner regional bodies in order to generate clear options on where and how to improve the effectiveness of existing implementation activities. There is a similar need to start improving the use and capture of socio-economic information through catchment and sub-catchment monitoring programs linked to these actions. The selection of these data sets will also need to reflect or be informed by, industry data and local conditions. A key focus for delivery can be in demonstrating benefit from resource management interventions, both in terms of enterprise and community viability, and, improved environmental performance.” (Walker et al 2006)

### **5.3. Appropriate structures, scales and scope**

The role of regional bodies as brokers of partnerships and co-investment in regions has been highly successful. In several larger NHT regions however, where funds for implementation are limited or difficult to secure, the ability of regional bodies to be effective brokers is restricted. In these cases transaction costs can rival the likely benefits to both regional bodies and potential partners.

The second key role embraced by regional bodies is coordination of NRM activities in regions. In fulfilling this role the non-statutory nature of northern regional bodies creates both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities stem from regional bodies’ capacity to work as a neutral broker, avoiding blockages within and between government agencies. Their non-government status also enables regional body to work well with industry and local stakeholders previously disenfranchised by, or shy of, government process.

To resolve more complex issues, such as coordinating *state of region reporting* contributions, the use of forums for negotiation with state/territory agency scientists and managers will be critical. The RCG structure adopted in Queensland shows considerable promise in both supporting agencies and regional bodies to take ownership for these joint-coordination responsibilities to greater effect. In moving into a new phase of implementation, regional bodies have responded by adjusting their governance structures and mode of operation to suit. Maintaining this existing flexibility is necessary to allow further adaptation as the implementation process matures.

Some regions appear too large to be effective under existing arrangements and expectations. That is, some existing planning areas under NAP and NHT do not match appropriate scales for collaboration or stakeholder connection to place or ‘local’ issues. Priorities and values are diluted and local ownership is reduced. The Northern Territory, WA Rangelands and larger regions of Queensland illustrate this difficulty of making progress without sufficient investment and recognition of sub-regional networks and local level support.

Similar to the question of scale is the appropriate scope of regional planning activity. Where the scope of regional body activity is focused on solving a few key shared issues e.g. weeds or water quality, effectiveness increases. And, if integrated approaches are adopted in addressing these key issues, then benefits to other assets (e.g. biodiversity, industry viability) can still be realised. Adopting a reduced scope allows momentum to build in implementation and helps identify likely outcomes to participants. Importantly social capital is built through the exercise of successfully addressing a shared problem. This success then allows more contentious or complex problems to be tackled in future.

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## Appendix 1. Web-based survey of regional NRM



### Survey on regional NRM arrangements

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey on regional natural resource management (NRM) arrangements. The survey should take approximately 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the level of detail you wish to provide.

We would like to reassure you that your identity will not be disclosed when reporting the information and your responses will remain strictly confidential.

**Your password:**

Note that you can save your responses at any time by clicking on the "Save responses" button at the end of the page, and return to complete it at a later time. If you have completed the survey, please check the box near the button.

1. Compared to 12 months ago what is different about doing NRM business in your region?
2. What are the key strengths of the current regional NRM arrangements in your region?
3. What aspects of the current regional NRM arrangements are not working?
4. In the next 1-3 years what needs to happen for the regional NRM arrangements to be successful?
5. In your region, what do you see as the major achievements from the new regional NRM arrangements so far?
6. What outcomes do you expect to see from regional NRM in the longer term?

**Figure 1: Screen capture showing examples of open-ended questions**



provide an example if possible):

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**21. New partnerships between industries, government and communities are emerging to address NRM challenges in the region**

Current:                      strongly disagree                      neutral                      strongly agree                      don't know

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Over the last 12 months:                      has got much worse                      has stayed the same                      has greatly improved                      don't know

---

Importance to regional NRM is:                      not important                      critically important                      don't know

---

Please justify your answer (and provide an example if possible):

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**22. Taking a regional approach to NRM has made existing on-ground activities in this region more strategic**

Current:                      strongly disagree                      neutral                      strongly agree                      don't know

---

Over the last 12 months:                      has got much worse                      has stayed the same                      has greatly improved                      don't know

---

Importance to regional NRM is:                      not important                      critically important                      don't know

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Please justify your answer (and provide an example if possible):

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I have completed the survey:

**Figure 3: Final page of survey including sign-off**