

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

**June 2006  
Milestone Report 4  
Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project  
Tropical Savannas Management CRC**



**Bruce Taylor<sup>1</sup> Geoff McDonald<sup>1</sup> Sonja Heyenga<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Hoverman<sup>2</sup>  
Tim Smith<sup>1</sup> Cath Robinson<sup>1</sup>**

1. CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Brisbane
2. Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water (Qld)

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was undertaken as part of Theme 3: Regional Planning and Management of the Tropical Savannas CRC. The project team would like to thank and acknowledge the participation of Regional NRM Bodies in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and State and Territory Government agencies.

Hardcopy ISBN:

Online ISBN:

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
1.1. Regional planning in Northern Australia .....	7
1.2. Objectives of the Healthy Savanna Planning Systems project.....	10
1.3. Second benchmark of regional planning arrangements .....	10
1.4. Study area.....	10
1.5. Overview of NRM arrangements and regional NRM bodies.....	11
1.5.1. Northern Territory.....	12
1.5.2. Western Australia.....	13
1.5.3. Queensland.....	15
<b>2. Methods</b> .....	<b>18</b>
2.1 Approach.....	18
2.2 Evaluation framework and criteria.....	19
2.3. Key informant survey.....	21
2.4. Case studies in regional planning.....	23
2.5. Caveats and considerations .....	23
<b>3. Results</b> .....	<b>25</b>
3.1. Regional context.....	26
3.1.1. Thinking regionally (criterion 1).....	28
3.1.2. Stakeholder culture and commitment (criterion 2).....	29
3.1.3. Understanding NRM (criterion 3) .....	31
3.1.4. Recognising regional diversity and complexity (criterion 4) .....	32
3.2. Regional structures.....	32
3.2.1. Coherent policy and governance (criterion 5).....	32
3.2.3. Roles and responsibilities (criterion 7).....	36
3.2.4. Participation and engagement structures (criterion 8).....	38
3.2.5. Regional resourcing is adequate (criterion 9).....	40
3.2.6. Monitoring return on investment (criterion 10).....	41
3.2.7. Structures for integrating knowledge and information (criterion 11).....	43
3.3. Regional processes .....	44
3.3.1. Processes for integrating knowledge and values (criterion 12).....	45
3.3.2. Capacity to participate (criterion 13).....	47
3.3.3. Procedural fairness (criterion 14).....	50
3.3.4. Adaptive and responsive processes (criterion 15).....	50
3.3.5. Linkages between scales and activities (criterion 16) .....	51
3.4 Regional outcomes	
3.4.1. Improved social capital of planners and managers (criterion 17) .....	53
3.4.2. Effective and connected institutions (criterion 18) .....	54
3.4.3. Improved resource condition (criterion 19).....	59
3.5. Summary of criteria attributes by relative performance.....	59

<b>4. Key findings and lessons .....</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1. Identity, roles and responsibilities.....	61
4.2. Governance issues in regions .....	62
4.3. Impacts of different jurisdictional approaches on regional outcomes.....	63
4.4. The importance of “doing” and getting on with the job.....	64
4.5. Partnerships and regional priorities.....	65
4.6. Links to local, catchment and other sub-regional groups.....	66
4.7. Who is - and isn’t - at the NRM table in regions .....	66
4.8. A more strategic investment?.....	67
4.9. The failure of formal data and information systems .....	68
4.10. A reality check on expectations .....	68
<b>5. Future needs for viable northern regional NRM.....</b>	<b>70</b>
5.1. Sustainable livelihood aspirations.....	70
5.2. Cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems.....	70
5.3. Appropriate structures, scales and scope.....	71
<b>References .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendix 1. Web-based survey of regional NRM .....</b>	<b>76</b>

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Northern Australia’s tropical savannas .....	7
Figure 2. Australia’s NRM regions .....	9
Figure 3. The Northern Territory NRM region	
Figure 4. The Rangelands NRM Region and sub-regions	
Figure 5. NRM Regions in Queensland	
Figure 6. Major project implementation steps in the two evaluation phases 2003-6	
Table 1. Criteria for evaluation of regional NRM planning arrangements.....	20
Table 2. Summary of evaluation phases and methods.....	21
Table 3. Respondent profile by jurisdiction, respondent type and investment region type.....	22
Table 4. Summary of ‘state’ and ‘trend’ responses from closed survey questions.....	60

## 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.

---

<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.