

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.

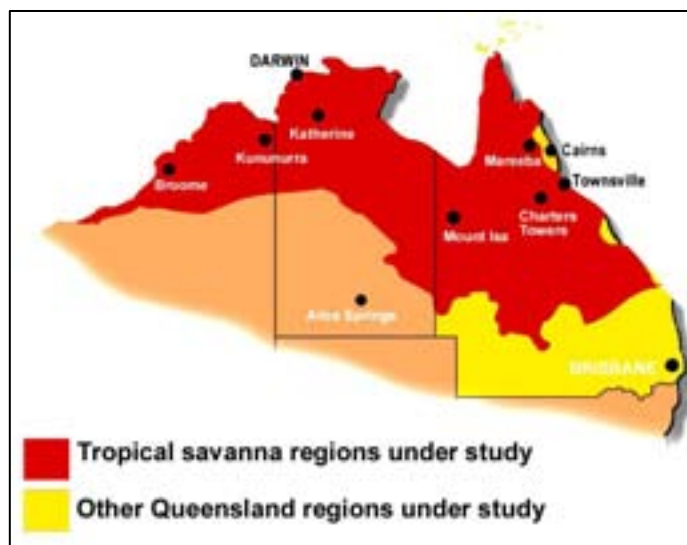


Figure 1. Northern Australia's tropical savannas

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 bodies² 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.³

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

³ 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

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.

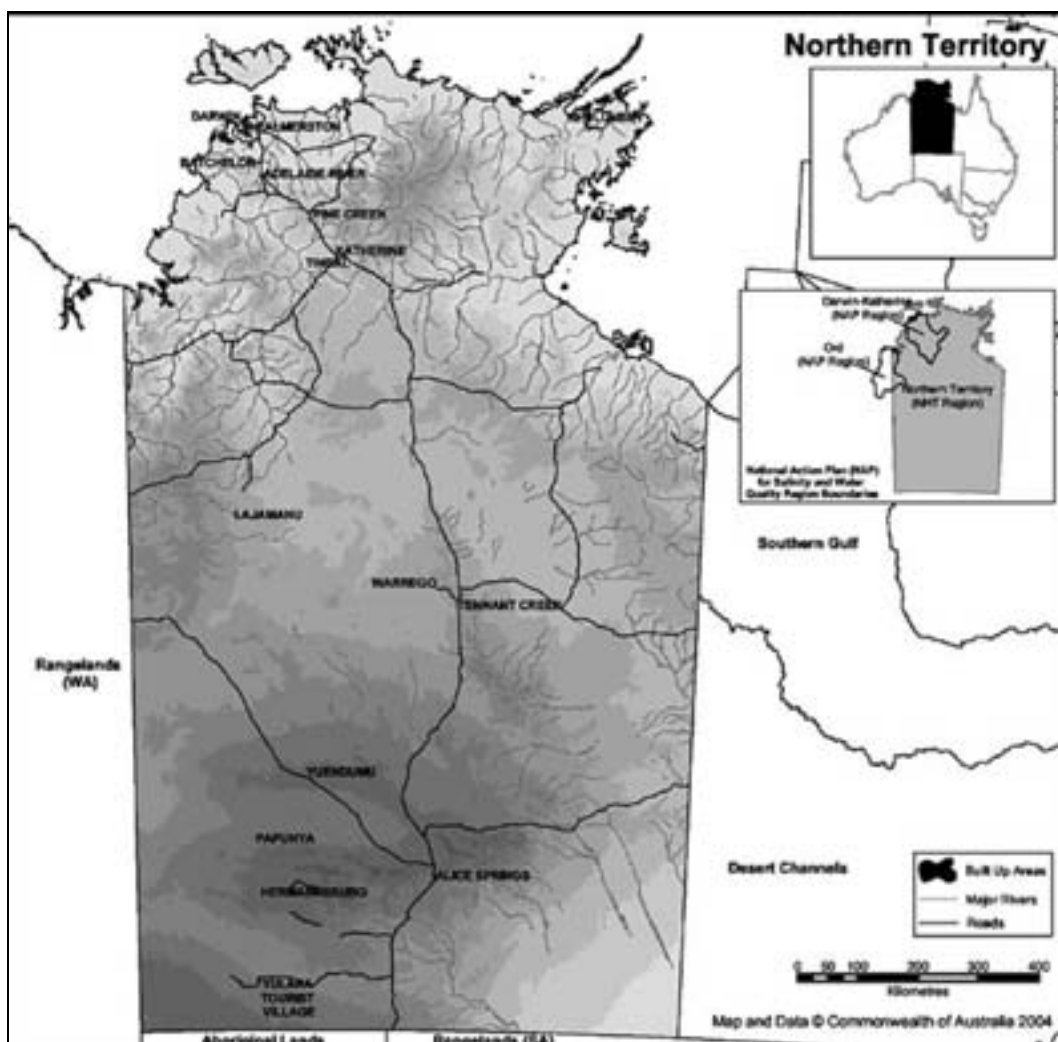


Figure 3. The Northern Territory NRM region

(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 Catchments⁴ 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).

⁴ 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 Group⁵ (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.

⁵ 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.