

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 government⁶ (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).

⁶ 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).

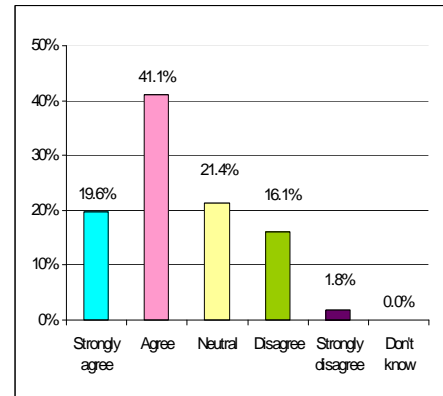


Figure 8a. Current situation of stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

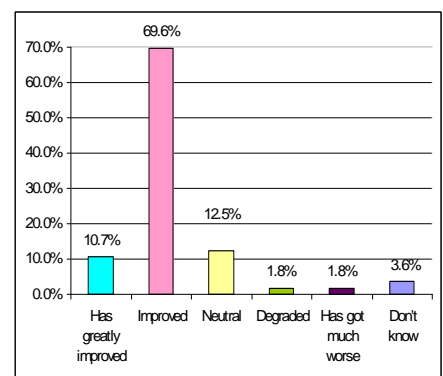


Figure 8b. Trend in stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

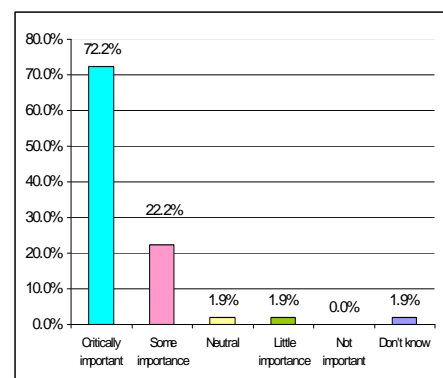


Figure 8c. Importance of stakeholders recognising and accepting NRM issues

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

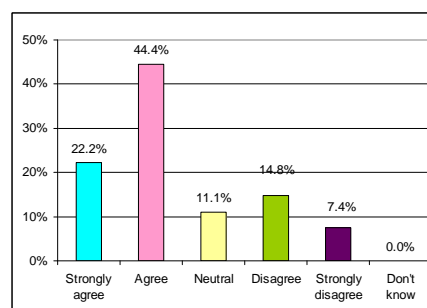


Figure 9a. Current situation of stakeholder collaboration

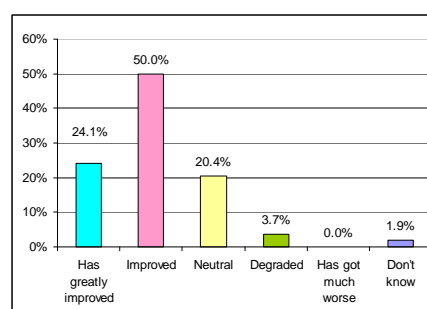


Figure 9b. Trend of stakeholder collaboration

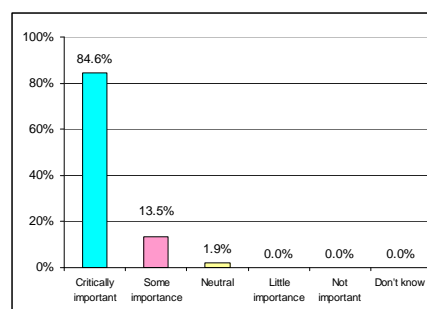


Figure 9c. Importance of stakeholder collaboration

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).

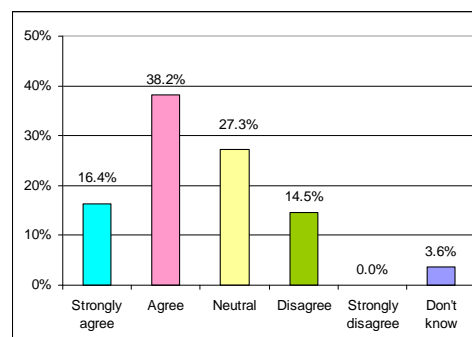


Figure 10a. Current situation of recognising the triple bottom line

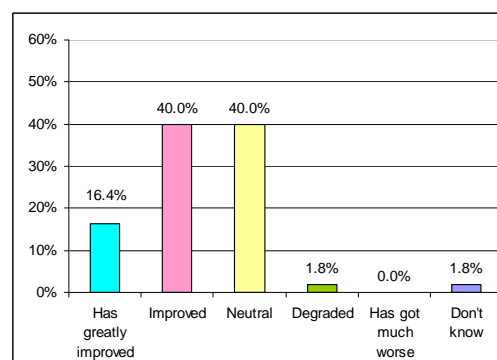


Figure 10b. Trend in recognising the triple bottom line

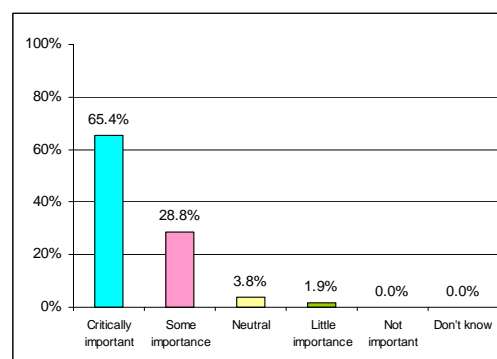


Figure 10c. Importance of recognising the triple bottom line

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.

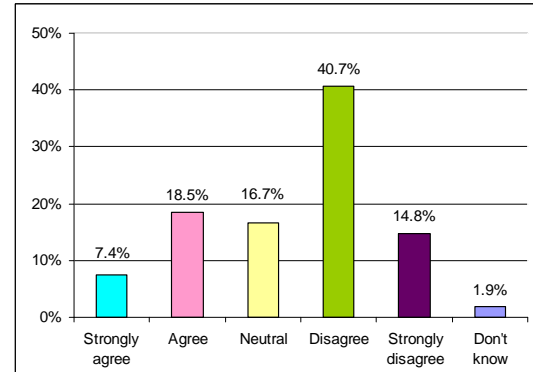


Figure 11a. Current situation in aligning NRM priorities

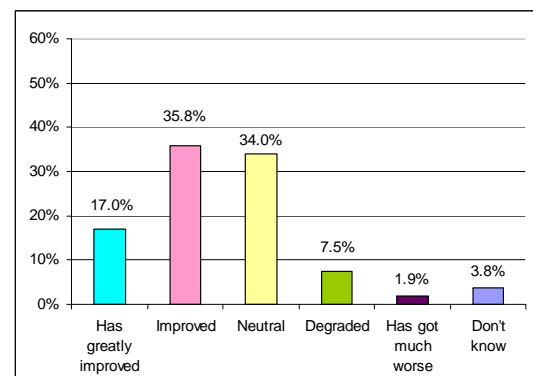


Figure 11b. Trend in aligning NRM priorities

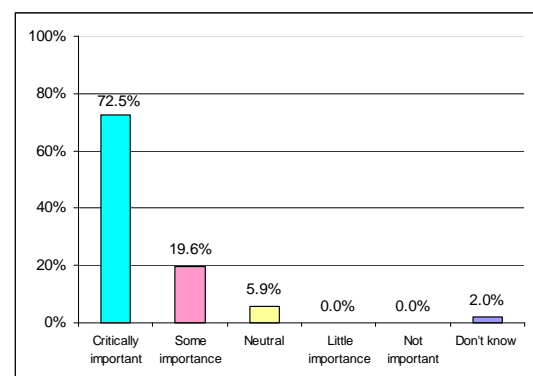


Figure 11c. Importance of aligning NRM priorities

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).

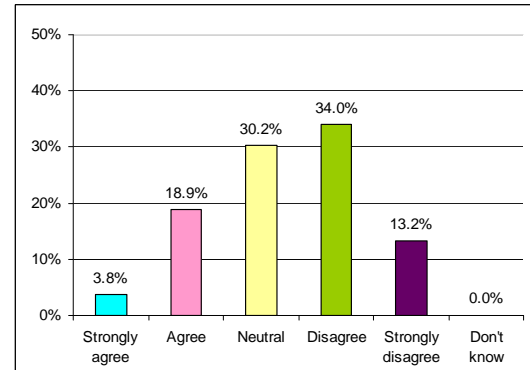


Figure 12a. Current situation of understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

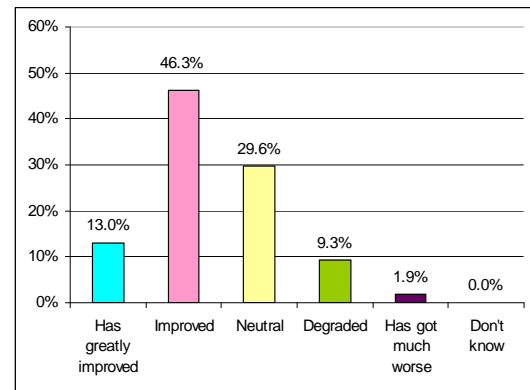


Figure 12b. Trend in understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

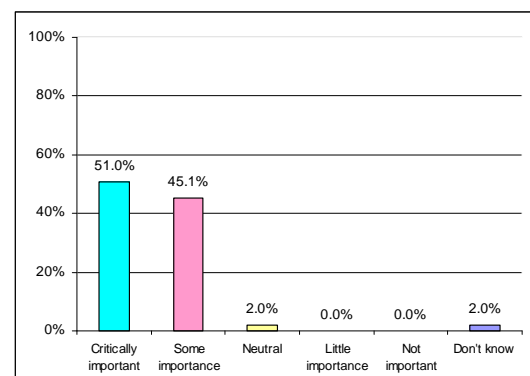


Figure 12c. Importance of understanding roles and responsibilities for NRM

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).

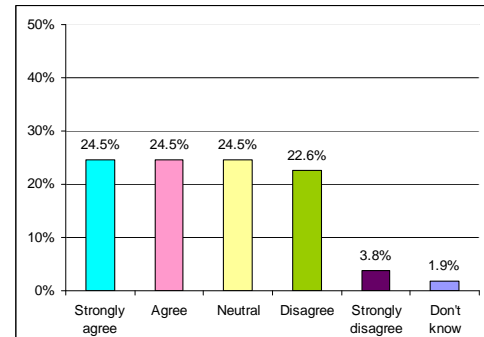


Figure 13a. Current situation: Inclusive investment and implementation

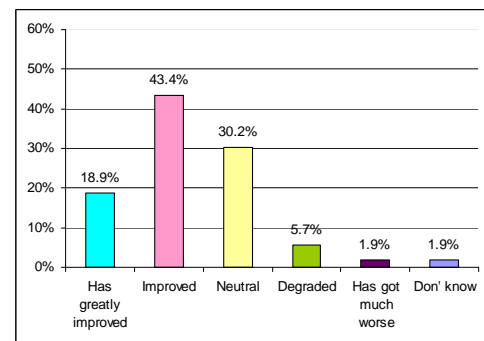


Figure 13b. Trend: Inclusive investment and implementation processes

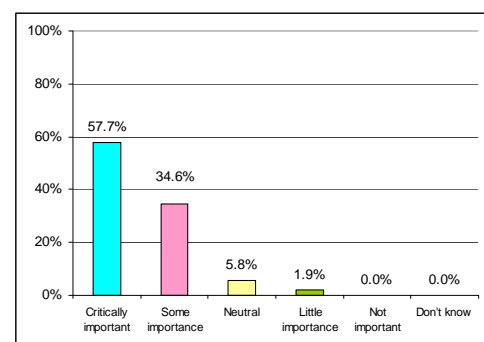


Figure 13c. Importance: Inclusive investment and implementation processes

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).

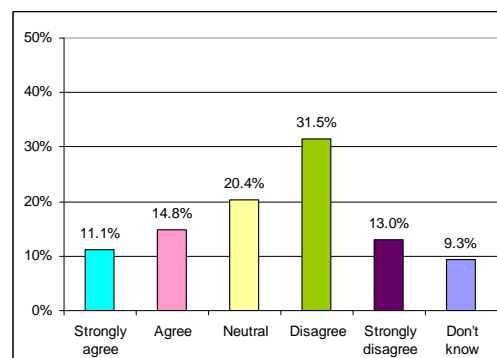


Figure 14a. Current situation in monitoring management actions

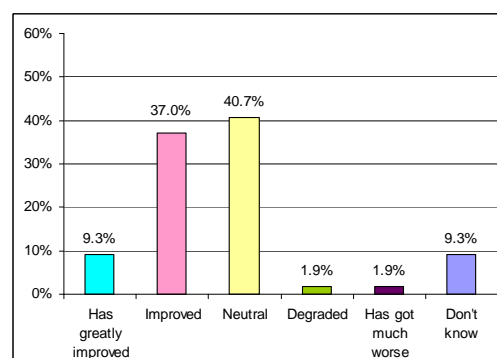


Figure 14b. Trend in monitoring management actions

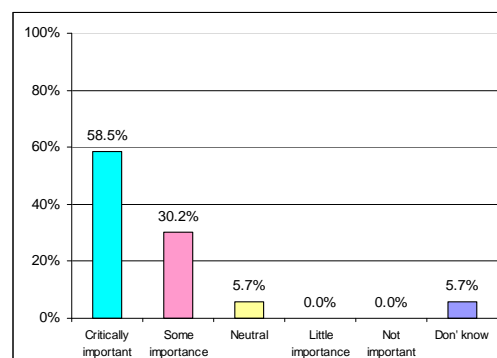


Figure 14c. Importance of monitoring management actions

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 SMART⁷ 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 1st ‘annual’ RIS review, some four months into the first year of implementation, was followed by a 2nd ‘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.

⁷ 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).

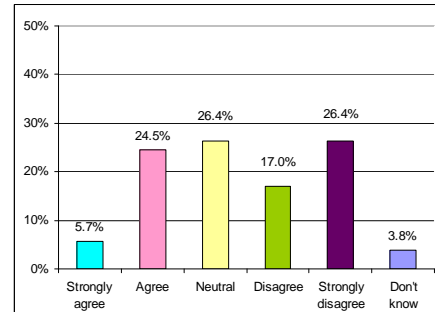


Figure 15a. Current situation of data sharing and information management

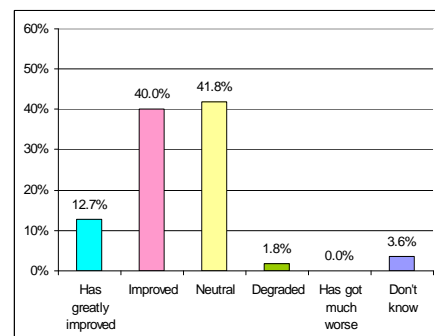


Figure 15b. Trend in data sharing and information management

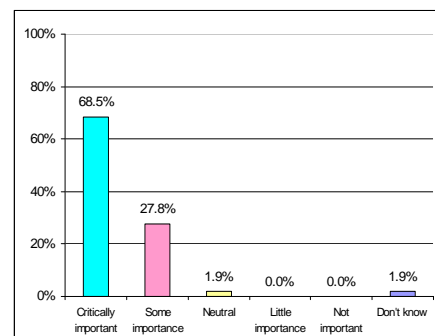


Figure 15c. Importance of data sharing and information management

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).

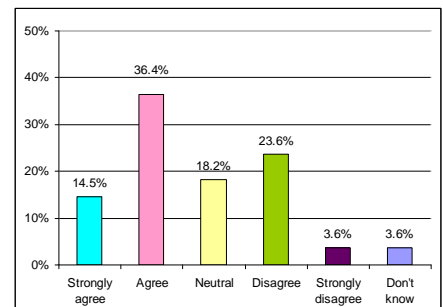


Figure 16a. Current situation of Indigenous knowledge

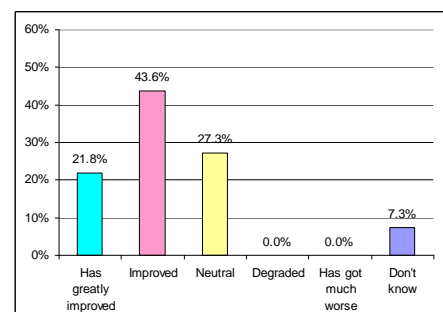


Figure 16b. Trend in Indigenous knowledge

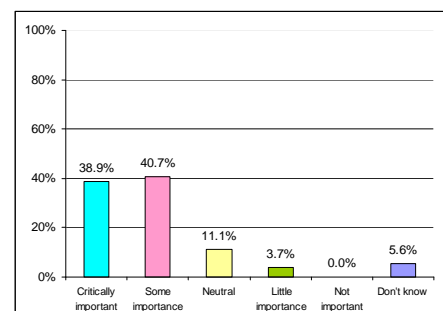


Figure 16c. Importance of Indigenous knowledge

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).

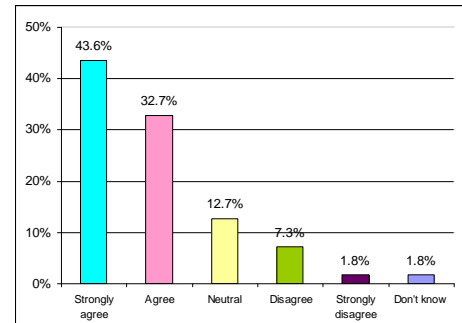


Figure 17a. Current situation: local knowledge

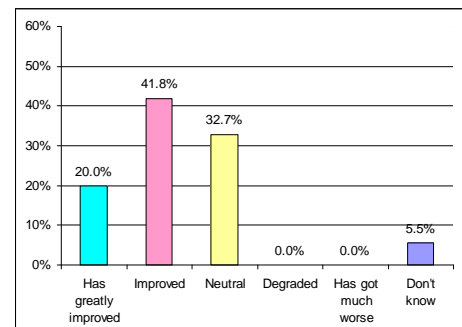


Figure 17b. Trend in local knowledge use

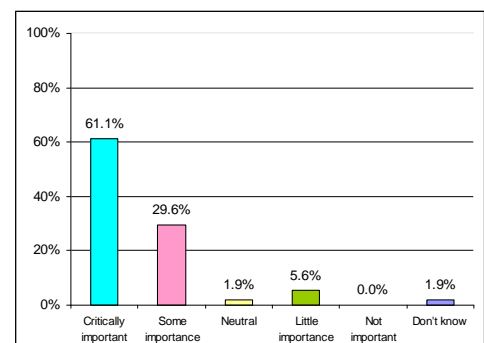


Figure 17c. Importance of local knowledge

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).

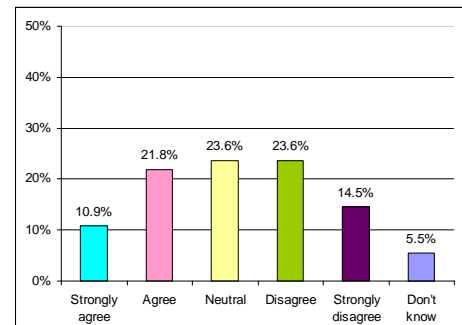


Figure 18a. Current situation in capacity to participate

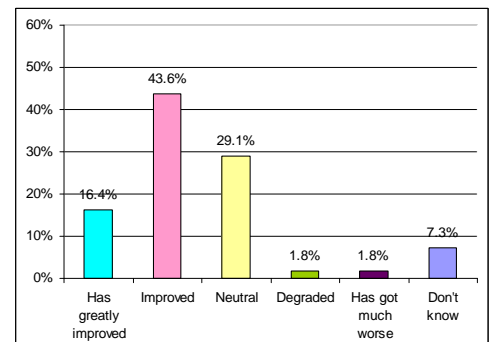


Figure 18b. Trend of capacity to participate

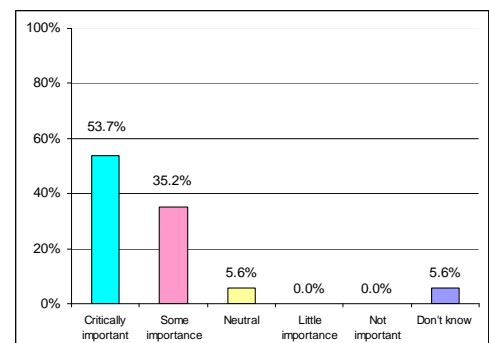


Figure 18c. Importance in capacity to participate

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.

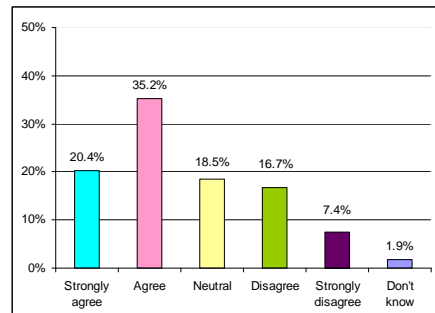


Figure 19a. Current situation - local government contribution to NRM

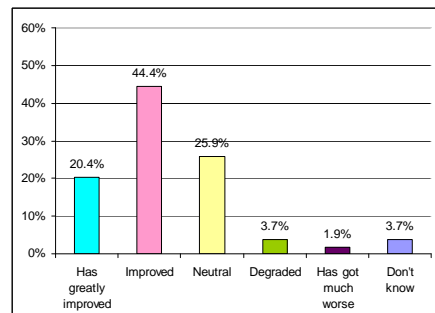


Figure 19b. Trend in local governments contributions to NRM

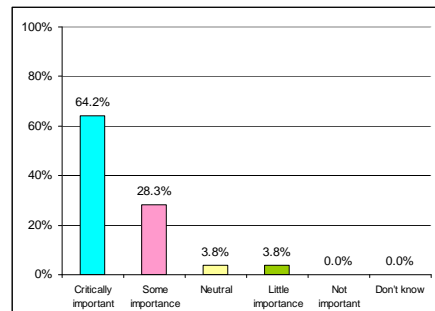


Figure 19c. Importance of local government contribution to NRM

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).

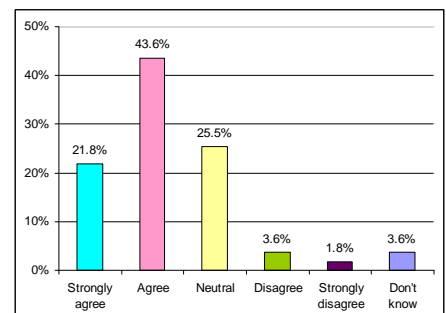


Figure 20a. Current situation of learning culture and networks

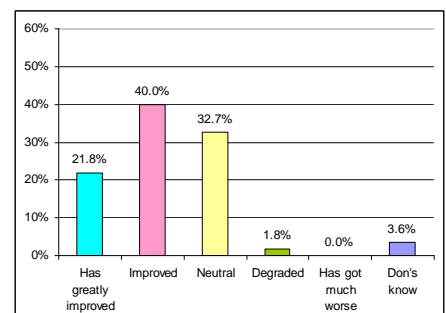


Figure 20b. Trend in learning culture and networks

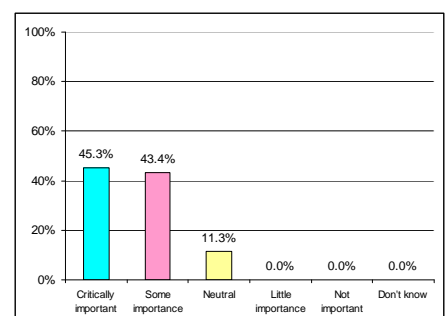


Figure 20c. Importance of learning culture and networks

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.

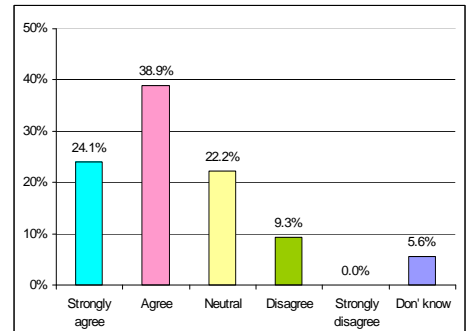


Figure 21a. Current situation of links with sub-regional processes

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.

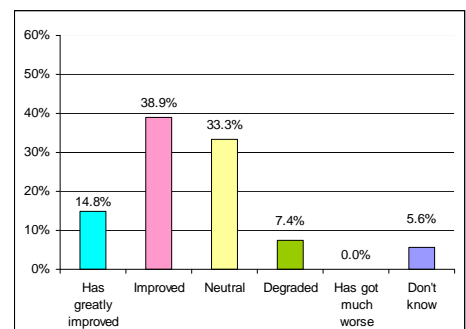


Figure 21b. Trend of links to sub-regional processes

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.

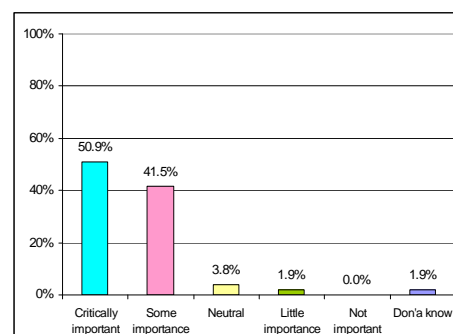


Figure 21c. Perceived importance of links with sub-regional processes

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

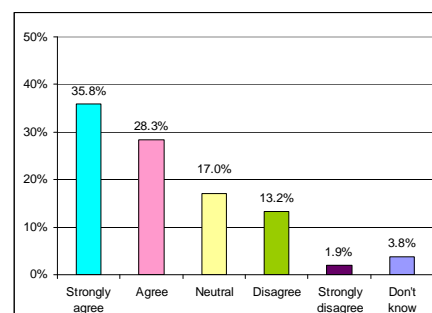


Figure 22a. Current situation - strategic on-ground activities

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).

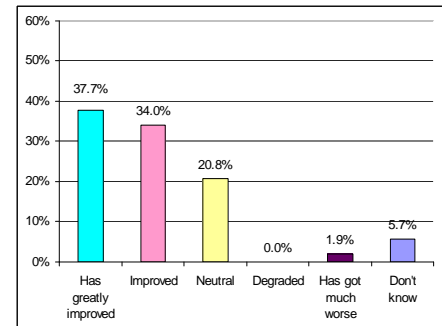


Figure 22b. Trend in strategic on-ground activities

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).

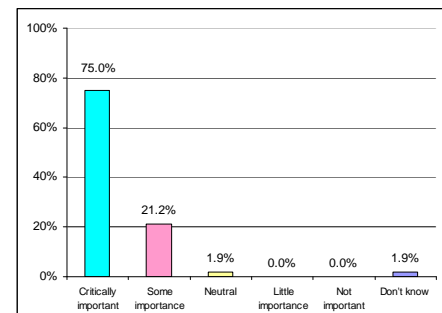


Figure 22c. Importance of strategic on-ground activities

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.

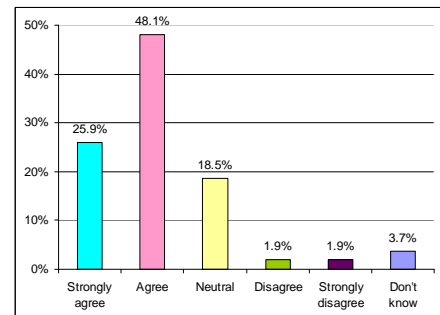


Figure 23a. Current situation in regional partnerships

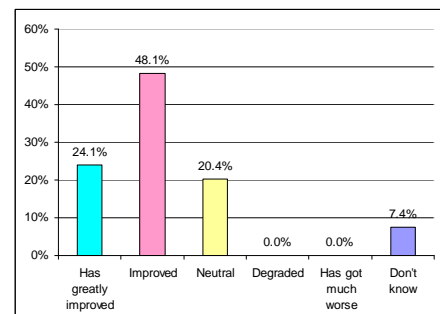


Figure 23b. Trend in regional partnerships

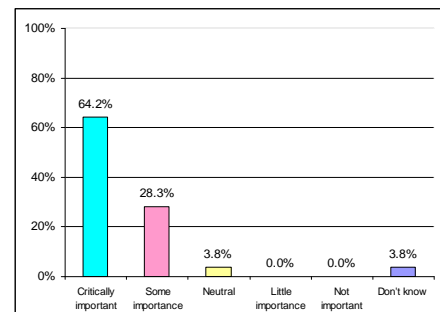


Figure 23c. Importance of new regional partnerships

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 ^c
	Agree ^a	Neutral	Disagree ^b	
Currently working well				
Local knowledge used and valued	77	13	9	↑ ^d
New regional partnerships are forming	74	19	4	↑
Linkages between regional and local processes	67	24	10	↑ / - ^e
Learning culture and networks exist	65	26	5	↑
Variable performance within and between regions				
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	↑ / -
Currently in poor state				
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	↑ / -

^a summation of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses

^b summation of “strongly disagree” and “disagree” responses

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

^d the upward arrow (↑) means that there is a positive trend in the development of the relevant attribute

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