

4. Key findings and lessons

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

4.1. Identity, roles and responsibilities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2. Governance issues in regions

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

Broadly speaking, a significant outcome of the regional NRM process to date has been stronger cross-government and whole of government cooperation, particularly at the regional and macro-regional level⁸. This is likely to improve across northern Australia as regional arrangements become more established in the Northern Territory and Western Australia and with time as regional bodies continue to learn from partnership experiments with their neighbours and government agency collaborators. Respondents stated this cooperation has brought greater alignment of effort in service provision amongst government agencies. Structures such as Queensland's RCGs provide greater coherency of policy advice and state agency governance arrangements, which has in turn improved relationships between regional bodies and state agencies.

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

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

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

4.3. Impacts of different jurisdictional approaches on regional outcomes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The process itself of developing tangible projects of common interest has proved critical to the development of functional and effective regional arrangements. Rather than being a pre-requisite for project development there are several cases where collaboration and belated stakeholder buy-in – including commitment of in-kind resources by agencies – has succeeded through jointly developing practical, asset focused projects⁹ in regions, where the lengthy up-front regional planning process had failed to secure that buy-in. This is not to overlook the benefits generated by the broader planning process itself, such as a clearer picture of potential collaborators priorities, culture, resources, and, the knowledge to design the project to meet strategic regional needs.

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

4.5. Partnerships and regional priorities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Local Government

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

Indigenous, conservation, agri-industry and mining interests

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

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

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

Valuing Indigenous and local knowledge

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

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

4.8. A more strategic investment?

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

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

4.9. The failure of formal data and information systems

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

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

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

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

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

4.10. A reality check on expectations

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

Regional target logic

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

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

Quick results in variable landscapes

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

While landscape change is desired by regional bodies, they recognise it is unlikely that major discernible improvements, say in water quality, will be achieved in the life of the current funding programs. In this setting the value of meaningful surrogate measures, such as delivery of significant on-ground works throughout a region, is being adopted as a useful indicator of progress. In the meantime the continuity and considerable social capital required for these changes has been slow to be reflected in the political climate characterised by uncertainty of on-going government support¹⁰.

Planning for what?

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

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

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