



**Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary & Waterway Management**

Technical Report 44



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**James Whelan  
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**February 2004**



CRC for Coastal Zone  
Estuary & Waterway Management





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# Regional Community-Based Planning: the challenge of participatory environmental governance

James Whelan<sup>1</sup> and Peter Oliver<sup>2</sup>  
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1. Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Griffith University. James.Whelan@griffith.edu.au
2. Senior Social Scientist, Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines  
Peter.Oliver@nrm.qld.gov.au

Dr Peter Oliver and Dr James Whelan are Citizen Science researchers with the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors as Coastal CRC researchers and are not those of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, the Queensland Government, Griffith University or the Coastal CRC.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported through the Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange project and the Coastal CRC's Citizen Science research theme. The project team would like to acknowledge the encouragement and constructive feedback provided by the Coastal CRC's CEO, Dr Rob Fearon and Science Coordinator Dr Regina Souter. This research would not have been possible without the participation of the many grassroots conservationists, carers and community activists who have generously shared with us their time, insights and passion. Their commitment and generosity holds a key to sustainable environmental custodianship.

An earlier version of this paper was presented by the authors during the March 2004 International Conference on Sustainable Development Research in Manchester. A revised version was subsequently published in the *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*.

# **Regional Community-Based Planning: the challenge of participatory environmental governance**

James Whelan and Peter Oliver

## **Abstract**

A new approach to environmental governance is sweeping Australia. Two national funding schemes require collaborative bodies to administer funds for regional on-ground projects to manage rivers, coastlines, biodiversity and vegetation. The devolution of power and resources to these bodies is contingent on participatory, representative and transparent processes.

This decentralisation of responsibility reflects stakeholder expectations and a focus on empowerment and social capital. Supporters of the new regional arrangements anticipate the heightened inclusion of community members in decision-making will contribute to a holistic and collaborative approach, in stark contrast to adversarial, 'decide and announce' approaches. Their case is strengthened by the consensus that traditional top-down governance has demonstrably failed.

This paper focuses on a collaborative regional natural resource management (NRM) group in South East Queensland, Australia's fastest growing region. The membership of this recently-convened Regional Body includes local government delegates, representatives of urban and rural industry, community and conservation organisations. A three-year study will track the development of the Regional Body, focusing particularly on the way it enables on-ground NRM and environmental groups to develop and implement a regional environmental management plan to address major natural resource management issues and pressures.

## **Collaborative-based regional NRM: an emerging paradigm**

Governments at all levels in Australia are using a combination of three approaches to address issues relating to the sustainable management of natural resources and the environment. These are: (1) a green planning (rational policy) approach involving the formulation and implementation of long-term policies, strategies and plans; (2) an institutional reform approach focusing on the development of new governance arrangements and the development and enforcement of legislation and regulations; and (3) a social mobilisation approach which focuses on encouraging community and industry action to address shared problems (Buhrs and Aplin 1999, p.317). The third approach, social mobilisation, is increasingly favoured internationally and places an increased emphasis on citizen participation in natural resource management. This is reflected at a national level in Australia in the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and National Action Plan (NAP) for Salinity and Water Quality programs. The NHT was established in 1996 to direct Australian Government funding to environmental restoration and conservation. Its second phase (NHTII) will provide AUS\$1B for sustainable management initiatives between 2001 and 2006 including \$350M for water quality strategies. Projects funded through this scheme have provided participation opportunities for more than 400 000 Australians. The NAP is the Australian Government plan to "work with government and non-government agencies, and the community, to address, recover and restore waterways from salinity problems and improve water quality" (Roberts Research 2003). It is a joint commitment of Australian, state and local governments of \$1.4B over seven years. These two national schemes provide support for the development and implementation of regional NRM strategies. According to Environment Australia (2000, p.6), the NHT and NAP are examples of national and state governments acting to "provide a framework for cooperative partnerships between communities, industry and all levels of government". Indeed, the mid-term review of the Natural Heritage Trust suggested that

partnership arrangements between the national government, States and Territories be “further strengthened and extended to more effectively include local government, the community and industry” (Environment Australia 2000, p.6).

A bilateral agreement between the Queensland (state) and national governments concerning these regional plans specifies that strategies are to be developed by regional bodies through consultation that engages each level of government as well as community, key stakeholders and potential investors (Joint State and Commonwealth Steering Committee, 2002). The stated rationale for this approach is that a consultative and inclusive process which provides opportunities to contribute to problem definition, target setting and the development of strategies will enhance ownership of problems and commitment to implementing solutions. Criteria for consultative processes articulated in the agreement include early and iterative involvement of key stakeholders, well-planned and comprehensive processes, processes which build on previous regional consultation, the development of social profiles to address regional needs and securing stakeholder commitment (Joint State and Commonwealth Steering Committee 2002, p.7). The anticipated benefits of such regional bodies include: consolidation of partnership approach, regular performance monitoring and evaluation, and better integration and coordination of existing structures, arrangements, strategies and programs (Williams 2002, p.2).

Regional bodies are responsible for administering Australian government funding for sustainable natural resource management for the five-year period 2003-2007. They will approach this task by developing and implementing regional plans that include priority actions, targeted outcomes, strategic investment plans and arrangement for regular monitoring and evaluation of performance (Williams 2002, p.2). In Queensland, fourteen regional bodies have been established to manage the funds available through these two Commonwealth schemes (\$11.39M in 2003/04 – the first year of operation). The regional body responsible for the development and implementation of a regional NRM plan for South East Queensland and funding of approximately \$1M in 2003-04 was formally constituted at an inaugural annual general meeting 25<sup>th</sup> July 2003. The group, Natural Resource Management South East Queensland Incorporated (NRMSEQ) comprises ordinary members which are organisations with an interest in regional conservation and twenty-two board members who are broadly representative of community interests (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Regional Body Board membership and divisions**

Integrated Catchment Management and Landcare ('Carers')	5 members
Environment	2 members
Local government	5 members
Research and education	1 member
Coastal and marine	2 members
Traditional Owners	2 members
Rural industry	2 members
Urban industry	2 members
Western Catchments Group	1 member

This new organisation is responsible for the development and implementation of a regional plan for the South East Queensland region. The region, approximately 2.5 million hectares in area, enjoys remarkable biological diversity including 4 000 plant taxa and 800 freshwater and terrestrial vertebrate fauna (Queensland Government 2003, p.12). Regional ecosystems include mangroves, rainforest and eucalypt and melaleuca forests. These natural assets are under intense pressure from land clearing, increasing demand for natural resources and population growth. The population of 2.3 million people is predicted to grow to 3.4 million between 2000 and 2021. The region encompasses nineteen local government jurisdictions. The results of these pressures include habitat degradation and fragmentation, pollution, species loss and climate change (Queensland Government 2003, p.17). The region has been profoundly transformed since European settlement in the early nineteenth century. These impacts have been social as well as physical, disrupting and dispersing the twenty traditional owner groups that had inhabited the region for at least forty thousand years.

## **Study design and method: ethnographic action research**

This three-year study is supported by the Queensland Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy and the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC) as part of the Citizen Science research theme. The Coastal CRC is a national joint venture comprising six universities, state and national environmental agencies and research institutions and the nation's largest local government authority (Brisbane City Council). This Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange project seeks to: (1) examine collaborative natural resource management arrangements that involve science, industry, community and government organisations; (2) identify and assess the collaborative processes used by these groups; and (3) identify strategies to nurture and transfer effective collaborative processes. In particular, the study is concerned with natural resource management negotiation approaches that are clear, transparent and democratic, and consistent with the expressed objectives of the current regional governance model.

The study draws on a growing international body of literature pertaining to collaborative environmental governance and deliberative democracy. The study utilises qualitative data collection strategies including semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Data is analysed to identify and explore recurring concepts and categories to develop and test emerging explanatory theories. As such, the study seeks to rigorously analyse qualitative data to develop a rich understanding of this social setting rather than to reach conclusions that are applicable universally. This paper is informed by a literature review, the researchers' combined community sector experience over twenty years, field observation and interviews with community members associated with the 'environment' and 'carers' divisions of the South East Queensland regional body. The discussion focuses on three inter-related themes that emerged as significant concerns of community sector participants in regional planning during the early stages of this research project: (i) power and conflict in collaborations and partnerships; (ii) knowledge exchange to underpin governance; and (iii) strategies to maximise community participation.

These themes are discussed in turn below to provide an initial basis for reflection, discussion and dialogue in this participatory action research.

### **Power and conflict in collaborations and partnerships**

The processes of collaboration and partnership are important to the work of regional bodies in terms of the way their Boards make decisions and take actions, and how these Boards relate to and involve others, such as place-based natural resource management, environmental and other community groups, industry and different levels of government. Power relationships and the recognition and resolution of conflict within these relationships have emerged as two interrelated themes in the early stages of this research.

Participants in the regional planning exercise have often been observed to use the terms collaboration and partnership interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, collaboration is defined as "the pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources, e.g., information, money, labour etc., by two or more stakeholders to solve a set of problems, which neither can solve individually," (Gray 1985, p.912). Partnerships, on the other hand, may be distinguished from collaboration as parties share power and jointly determine responsibility for making decisions and taking action (Arnstein 1969; Eisler 2002). A partnership approach to environmental and natural resource management involving government, business and civil society was advocated during the Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development (Anon 2002a; Anon 2002b; Calder 2002, p.2). In Australia, the benefits of partnership approaches to resolve difficult NRM problems have been reiterated at national and regional levels (National Natural Resource Management Task Force, 1999 p.11, p.27; Queensland Government 2003, p.1).

Initial analysis indicates that the new regional NRM governance arrangements present obstacles to the formation of partnerships. While they may encourage inclusiveness through

representation of diverse interests on regional bodies and potentially assist information sharing, consultation and collaboration between communities, industry and all levels of government, they do not readily lend themselves to the development of partnerships, particularly between government and non-government groups. For example, NRMSEQ is charged with the development and implementation of a regional NRM plan but this plan requires approval from separate government bodies. Firstly, the plan is considered by the Regional Coordination Group that consists of representatives of relevant state government agencies who support and advise NRMSEQ and other regional bodies. Secondly, the Regional Coordination Group provides advice and recommendations on regional NRM plans to the Joint Steering Committee which is comprised of Queensland and Australian Government officials and has state-wide responsibility for reviewing, approving regional NRM plans and allocating funding for their implementation.

These governance arrangements ensure that state and national governments have the power, if they see fit, to withhold approval and funding for NRM plans developed by regional bodies. While public servants are undoubtedly accountable for the appropriate use of taxpayer funds allocated through the Natural Heritage Trust, the lack of sharing of power and responsibility between the regional body and the Queensland and Australian Governments means that the development of partnerships between governments, community and industry to address shared NRM problems is not possible at present. It is important to note, however, that the relationship between the regional body and the Queensland Government is complex and dynamic, with several points of intersection where partnerships may prove possible.

The NRMSEQ constitution allows community and industry groups to be ordinary members as long as they fulfil certain criteria and that their primary focus of activity and interest falls within one of the nine 'divisions' represented on the NRMSEQ Board. Local governments within the region are included as one of these nine divisions and hence, are also eligible for ordinary membership. Member organisations may seek to influence decisions of the Board by making representations, communicating through divisional representatives on the Board, or by voting at general elections. These arrangements potentially allow NRMSEQ to share power and responsibility for decision-making and action-taking with member organisations and, by definition, to work in partnership with them. Individual organisations (those with a sub-regional geographic focus) and Queensland Government agencies may become affiliate members. Delegates of affiliate members may attend and participate in activities of NRMSEQ, but have no voting rights.

The membership of NRMSEQ currently includes sixty-seven community and industry groups and local government authorities as ordinary members, and six affiliate members of NRMSEQ including one affiliate member who attends Board meetings as an observer (Russell 2004). Institutional arrangements governing ordinary membership provide a framework within which collaboration and potentially even partnerships may develop in that they allow ordinary members to share power and responsibility with the NRMSEQ Board. The organisation employs six community support officers whose role is to help community and industry groups contribute to the development and implementation of the new regional NRM Plan.

This system of regional governance differs markedly from that found under the previous Commonwealth funding arrangement for community-based natural resource management (NHTI). More than one environmental representative interviewed commented that the new arrangements delayed or stalled on-ground project management and development.<sup>1</sup> They explained that under the previous arrangements they had access to project officers and resources to directly support their place-based work. While this level of support was not necessarily considered adequate, interviewees consider the new arrangements resulted in the loss of local support staff and resources. Under NHTII, community groups are compelled to focus on the development and implementation of a regional NRM Plan in collaboration with the regional body's community support officers. This sentiment was expressed clearly during a major forum on new regional NRM arrangements held in late 2003 where participants expressed their sense that the new regime disadvantaged and disempowered them. One forum participant who was active with a Carers' group responded to a Queensland

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<sup>1</sup> Interview 22/10/03.

Government officer's presentation by asking, "You have been talking and consulting for several years. Why kick the people on the ground? Why kick them? We need leaders and facilitators in our own areas, not coordinators that are four hours drive away!"<sup>2</sup>

Other informants express support for the new regional arrangements while also identifying difficulties they have encountered. One Board member commented that he was reluctant to criticise some early decisions of the Board regarding flow of information to Board members, staffing matters and office accommodation for fear of being labelled as obstructive of the new regional arrangements.<sup>3</sup> This resonates with Poncelet's observation (2001) that participants of a multi-stakeholder environmental partnership in Belgium were reluctant to cause or address conflict within their group as this appeared contrary to group culture and the unstated expectation that collaborative and partnership-based groups would be conflict-free zones. By contrast, Eisler and Montuori (2001, p.16) suggest conflict is a natural and healthy element of partnership-based organisations and a potential source of creativity. They argue that by managing conflict according to partnership principles, partners can develop mutual and constructive relationships. Another NRMSEQ Board member commented on the challenge of reconciling the tension between participation within NRMSEQ, which he saw as essentially a government-sanctioned process relating to natural resource and environmental management, while still maintaining the right work outside the NRMSEQ when his environmental group saw a need to be in conflict with government over decisions and actions they had taken on environmental matters.<sup>4</sup>

These issues of power-sharing and conflict resolution appear significant factors affecting the efficacy of knowledge exchange between participants within these new regional NRM governance arrangements, the second emerging theme in this study.

## **Knowledge exchange to underpin governance**

In order to develop an agreed regional plan, NRMSEQ needs to collate and synthesise knowledge from multiple sources including both expert and local knowledge. During the last decade, several regional strategies have been developed for coastal zone, water quality and river management, landscape conservation, growth management, property, pest, weed and biodiversity management. There have also been State of the Environment reports, catchment management plans and a regional forest agreement. The processes by which each of these plans and reports have been conducted have entailed varying degrees of community participation and, in every case, generated considerable data pertinent to the new challenge of developing the regional NRM plan.

As noted by Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000, p.17), community members are increasingly well-equipped to integrate and utilise these data sets. In the South East Queensland region, community groups have played a leadership role in the development of environmental strategies. Members of the environment and carers' divisions were active participants in advisory and steering groups, which developed the prior strategies that are now to be integrated into the regional plan. They are conscious the planning exercise will involve "incorporating all available data" and that this plan remains just one element of a complex web of state and local government planning processes: "one silo of information that feeds into the 'big brother'".<sup>5</sup> During their meetings, environmentalists exchange and discuss maps and data sets they have subjected to more comprehensive analysis than publicly available reports. One community-sector Board member synthesised land-clearing statistics to highlight trends. This report was distributed to community groups and posted on the non-government organisation's website. Information exchange also continues between meetings through email networks.

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<sup>2</sup> Observation 19/11/03.

<sup>3</sup> Observations 15/10/03; 20/11/03.

<sup>4</sup> Observation 22/10/03

<sup>5</sup> Observation 20/11/03; interview 22/10/03.

Managers and agency staff appear to underestimate the sophistication of data systems available to community members. It came as a surprise to some planners and managers that community groups within this region undertook their own catchment modelling exercise in order to assess possible management options. The modelling tools used for this exercise had previously been considered appropriate only for 'expert' engineers, but were effectively utilised by interested community groups. Their independent modelling helped community members examine the assumptions made by government modellers and to test alternative parameters. The exercise reflects the groups' empowerment and capacity for active participation.<sup>6</sup>

These forms of knowledge exchange provide examples of social learning, the benefits of which are practical, political and symbolic. Transparent, creative and sophisticated data exchange and analysis embodies the principles informing the NHT, NAP and Queensland natural resource management approaches by facilitating genuinely democratic and deliberative governance. The relationships forged between stakeholders as they work side by side to conduct the regional group's business allow for more than data exchange. Participants exchange values, norms and beliefs and build social and institutional capital, thereby contributing to processes of social learning (Davidson and Stratford, 2001 p.44). For the purposes of this study, social learning is defined as a process by which people work together to gain information and values that guide decisions and actions about how they will interact with each other and their non-human surroundings (Falk and Kilpatrick 1999; Lee 1993; Milbrath 1989). Social learning is the means by which individuals and groups of people accumulate social capital and is expressed in terms of trusting relationships, extensive social networks, obligations and expectations, norms and sanctions (Portes 1998, p.7; Rydin and Pennington 2000, pp.153-190).

The processes of knowledge exchange ideally value both 'expert' and locally acquired knowledge to inform "change-oriented action" (Davidson and Stratford 2001, p.43). Such processes help to maximise community participation, the third theme emerging in this study.

## **Maximising community participation**

Eleven Board members are responsible for coordinating the input from the non-government sector including conservation groups concerned with on-ground work (tree-planting, water quality monitoring) and political advocacy, coastal and inland concerns and Indigenous interests (Traditional Owners). The challenges facing these thirteen individuals are considerable. To fulfil community expectations concerning accountability and information exchange, these Board members need to consult widely, informing those to whom they are accountable of the decisions being made, seeking their input and ensuring the positions they express confer with the community consensus. This is especially complex as the system of representation is interest-based rather than determined by sub-regional location.

This challenge has prompted distinct and innovative strategies within the two divisions observed to date in this study. The five Board members representing 'Carer' groups have convened regular meetings that are widely promoted through established communication channels. These meetings facilitate a high level of sectoral inclusion in decision-making as individuals and groups involved in Landcare and catchment management are informed of the Board's business and have opportunity to contribute via their five representatives. In addition, the Carers exchange information with the organisations whose members' interests they represent on a daily basis through an email list-serve. These sophisticated accountability mechanisms are facilitated by this division's sound resource base. Although many active members of this division are volunteers, their organisations received funding during the first phase of the Natural Heritage Trust program (NHTI) to employ coordinators and establish offices. As these offices were often co-located with local government agencies, the sector has developed close working relationships with environmental managers. Most of the individuals associated with the environment division, including both Board members, are volunteers. By

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<sup>6</sup> Observations 10/06/03, 21/08/03, 22/09/03, 9/10/03, 23/10/03, 6/11/03, 20/11/03, 5/12/03, 11/12/03, 29/01/04.

comparison with the Carers groups, environment organisations are relatively less well resourced. Like the Carers, the environment division has supported their two Board representatives by convening monthly meetings and establishing an email network for the exchange of information relating to the business of the regional body.

During the NRMSEQ meetings held to date, the thirteen non-government Board members have demonstrated considerable leadership and commitment. Their high level of involvement and ownership of the regional planning process is evident in Board minutes: Carers and Environmentalists formulate a high proportion of the motions and suggestions supported by the Board.

Non-agency participants in collaborative governance arrangements contribute abilities and resources distinct from those of government participants (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2001). In this instance, the environment division groups and representatives draw on local knowledge, extensive community networks, long-term commitment and capacity for volunteer mobilisation. These resources are finite, however, and have already been stretched to the limit. One community sector interviewee identified fifteen parallel planning processes that each demanded NGO participation<sup>7</sup>. By sharing influence and control, government planning authorities also share expenses. Eckersley (2003, p.495) concluded that the national Landcare program, which was similarly collaborative, involved a degree of cost-shifting: a relinquishment of government responsibility and exploitation of voluntary and rural labour motivated by a concern to reduce government expenditure.

The regional planning process compensates for the burden experienced by community participants in a number of ways. Board members receive sitting fees, participate in regular training activities that address the technical and interpersonal dimensions of the planning exercise, and receive the support of 'community support officers' funded through the NHT and NAP schemes. Despite this encouragement and support for conservationists' participation, some meetings have been poorly attended by the community sector. Obstacles to participation appear to impede some groups more than others. Indigenous participation in initial meetings was minimal, despite the available Board positions for Traditional Owners, and women have consistently been in the minority.<sup>8</sup> Factors that may influence the level of participation include groups' resources including time, access to data and other information, the compressed timeline of this exercise, a history of competition for influence between some stakeholder groups, trust levels between groups, asymmetries in power (Ewing 2003) and the contrasting values and organisational cultures. To illustrate, the values of motivated Carers and Environmentalists are likely to divide along ecocentric and utilitarian lines. Government agencies generally have hierarchical structures, whereas industry groups delegate according to expertise and NGOs favour democratic structures.

It is also feasible that individuals and groups make rational choices not to participate in collaborative environmental governance. Across the region, there are many individuals and community groups that are not actively contributing to, or even aware of, the process. Groups may choose not to participate because they do not consider the NRM problems at hand a high priority, they do not observe other groups participating, they consider government-initiated decision-making processes inadequate and unlikely to improve, or they may be concerned that participation will constrain alternative strategies for influence (Oliver and Whelan 2003; Dukes and Firehock 2001).

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<sup>7</sup> Interview 22/10/03

<sup>8</sup> Observation 25/7/03 (Board meeting) eight women to forty men

## Conclusions

The three themes discussed here, power and conflict, knowledge exchange and maximising community participation, are clearly inter-related. The new regional NRM governance arrangements currently give the Queensland and Australian governments the right to withhold approval of regional NRM plans. While this may be understandable from an accountability viewpoint, this power and the provisions of the regional group's constitution that prohibit state and local Government officers from becoming members of a regional body, prevent partnership relationships between these levels of government and NRMSEQ in terms of sharing power and responsibility. Local government, industry and community groups are not similarly constrained. It is likely the arrangement and resulting relationships will evolve over time. This evolution may allow governance arrangements to develop that facilitate partnerships between community, industry and all levels of government to tackle regional NRM problems when appropriate. This outcome would rely on all parties understanding that accountability for decisions and actions must not to be confused with mistrust (O'Neill, 2002, pp.48-57). Enhanced social capital and effective social learning processes may provide a foundation for the continued evolution of these regional NRM governance arrangements. Participants will have to build trust and other elements of social capital in relationships between individuals and organisations to allow this to occur. Effective social learning must also occur, so that the capacities of all parties to participate in these arrangements are enhanced. This may promote knowledge exchange and community participation.

As this study proceeds, we will work with participants to further clarify barriers to effective participation in these new regional arrangements and to propose remedial strategies. The preliminary analysis and observations presented here are intended as a basis for reflection and discussion among participants involved in this action research project. They may also prove useful to participants in regional governance elsewhere. If we are to seek ways around barriers to effective participation and are also to maximise the benefits of these new regional arrangements, it will be important to ensure continuity and commitment from all parties (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2001) and that opportunities for continual feedback are provided (Dovers and Wild Rivers 2003, p.5; Davidson and Stratford 2001, p.44). This three-year action research project may assist this process.

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