

# **Benchmarking Regional Planning Arrangements for Natural Resource Management 2004–05**

**Progress, constraints and future  
directions for regions**

## **Standalone Executive Summary**

**May 2005**

**Milestone Report 3**

**Healthy Savanna Planning Systems Project**

**Tropical Savannas Management CRC**



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Front cover photo: Members of the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group developing criteria for a devolved grant to invest in pasture spelling, Georgetown, April 2005

Photo: Lionel Pero

# Contents

<b>Abbreviations and acronyms .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
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<b>Executive summary.....</b>	<b>1</b>
-------------------------------	----------

Introduction .....	1
Scope of the evaluation and study area .....	1
Benchmarking regional NRM .....	2
Thinking regionally, different regions and different models .....	3
Politics, commitment, expectations and culture .....	3
Linking scales and activities and coordinating regional effort.....	6
New roles and responsibilities in the regional system .....	7
Bringing knowledge and information together for NRM.....	9
Capacity of planners, managers and stakeholders.....	10
Making things happen: towards NRM outcomes .....	12
Focus for Stage 2 of the evaluation.....	13

## List of figures and tables

Figure 1 Northern Australia's tropical savanna regions .....	2
Figure 2 Queensland's Natural Resource Management regions .....	4
Table 1 Criteria for evaluation of regional NRM planning arrangements .....	15

## Abbreviations and acronyms

AGSIP	Agricultural State-wide Investment Projects
BMP	Best Management Practice
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
DCQ	Desert Channels Queensland, Inc
DLGPSR	Department of Local Government and Planning, Sport & Recreation, Queensland
DPI&F	Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, Queensland Government
DSD&I&I	Department of State Development and Innovation, Queensland Government
EMS	Environmental Management Systems
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland Government
FNQNRM	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management, Ltd
FMS	Farm Management Systems
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
GIS	Geographical Information Systems
ICM	Integrated Catchment Management
IPA	<i>Integrated Planning Act 1997 (Qld)</i>
JSC	Joint Steering Committee
MER	Monitoring Evaluation and Reporting
NAP	Abbreviation for NAPSWQ (see below)
NAPSWQ	National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NR&M	Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Queensland Government
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NRMSEQ	Natural Resource Management South East Queensland
NT	Northern Territory
PMP	property management planning
QLD	Queensland
QMDC	Queensland Murray Darling Committee
RCGs	Regional Coordination Groups (of Qld Government agencies)
RGMFs	Regional Growth Management Frameworks
ROCs	Regional Organisations of (Local Government) Councils
RPAC	Regional Planning Advisory Committee (for Regional IPA Planning)
SEQWC	South East Queensland—Western Catchments
TS-CRC	Tropical Savannas Management Cooperative Research Centre
WA	Western Australia
WETMA	Wet Tropics Management Authority
WRP	Water Resource Planning

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This report provides a benchmark of progress in regional planning for natural resource management in Queensland and the tropical savannas region of northern Australia during 2004. It is based on a review of regional plans and planning processes against a set of pre-defined criteria designed specifically to evaluate regional planning arrangements.

Regional policy frameworks are now widely promoted in Australia at the state, territory and federal levels in an effort to provide a strategic response to accelerating technological advances, increasing productivity growth and other pressures on sustainable development. Importantly, the regional turn of governance frameworks reflects a global trend to devolve decision making to reflect the local geographical context. This includes the development of innovative planning systems and approaches to integrate economic, social and environmental policies in a spatial context. It is also an approach that recognises many natural resource management (NRM) issues such as water quality, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources can be best measured and addressed technically at a regional scale—within river basins, biogeographical regions and production zones. Finally, the regional approach decentralises decision-making to enhance NRM at the property or local scale and facilitate a more open, participatory and community-based approach to setting and achieving NRM targets.

By using a set of criteria designed for evaluating regional planning systems, this report ‘benchmarks’ the progress of regional arrangements during 2004–05. This report is the first of two major benchmarking reports of the Tropical Savannas CRC research project Healthy Savanna Planning Systems.

The main goals of the project are to track progress of regional NRM, identify emerging constraints, lessons and adaptive management opportunities for improving regional planning systems.

A second benchmark of regional NRM will be conducted during 2005–06. While this first stage of the research focused on the Queensland experience, the second part of the evaluation will also draw on activities from the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

## Scope of the evaluation and study area

There is no single ‘regional plan’ in any region. Rather, a diversity of plans and planning activities exists that address various natural resource, economic development, environment and other issues. National programs such as the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality* (NAPSWQ) and the extension to the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT 2) are now the main drivers for regional resource use planning throughout Australia. The NAPSWQ and the NHT 2 focus on water quality, salinity and riparian zone management, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity and coastal management issues. Increasingly, states and territories produce regional plans covering sectors such as rivers, forests, economic development and these too are highly relevant to the composite (if not integrated) planning activity addressed in this project. Local governments have also produced plans, mostly with a land use and infrastructure focus.

The Regional Natural Resource Management Plan is a composite of a whole raft of plans at scales from national to local, which varies from territory/state to state, and even within a state or territory. Occasionally, there is a subsidiarity relationship between plans, such as those linking national or state conservation priorities into local planning and approval systems. More often, plans provided disjointed, uncoordinated and even contradictory responses to the same NRM issue. Regional NRM plans also reflected the roles of different players and activities that are part of the ‘system’ of regional planning. This included statutory and voluntary planning and management activities, industry involvement and other important sectors such as local government, Indigenous people, and the conservation sector.

The prime focus of this benchmark report is to evaluate the aggregate effectiveness of NRM planning in a region through the lens of regional arrangements and plans initiated by the NAPSWQ and the NHT programs—but the scope is wider. The evaluation views the delivery of these programs as important vehicles and catalysts within the regional planning system and the results refer to the new NRM regional bodies and their influence and effect on the development of effective planning arrangements *in toto*.

Due to the large scope of the evaluation, the research focuses on the structural and functional links between different players and activities in regions. The project covers the three jurisdictions of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The TS-CRC's primary interests are the tropical savanna regions within these jurisdictions. However, the project's partnership with Queensland's Department of Natural Resources and Mines has provided the resources to include Queensland's non-savanna regions in the evaluation, see Figure 1.

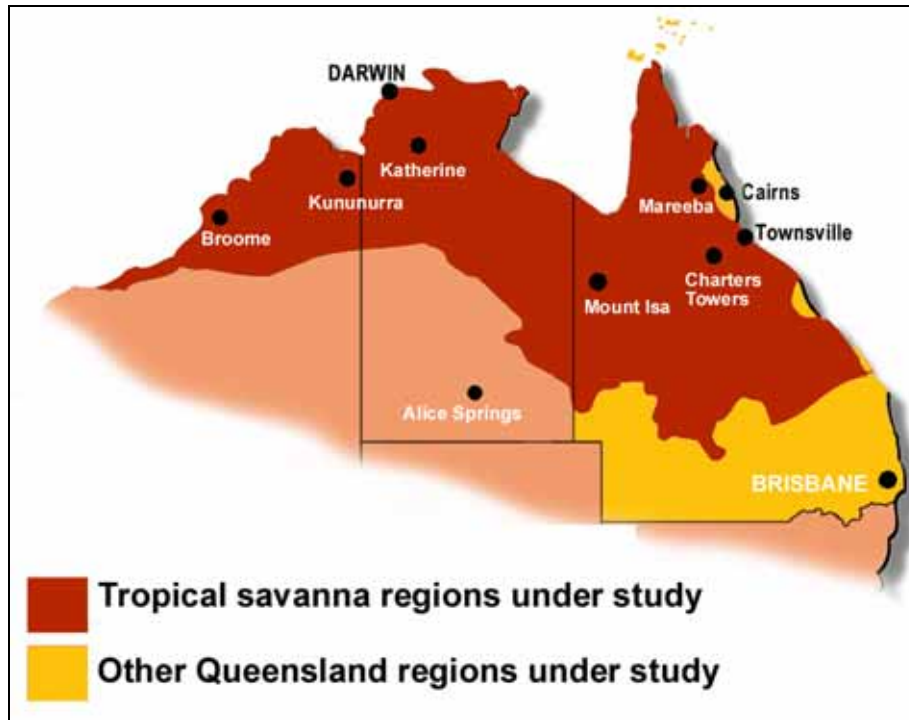


Figure 1 Northern Australia's tropical savanna regions

## Benchmarking regional NRM

Information for the benchmarking process was gathered through interviews with key staff of the regional NRM bodies and state government regional coordination groups (RCGs). Members of the research team also observed some of these regional forums as participant-observers. Desktop reviews of regional NRM plans were conducted and workshops with planners were held to support lesson sharing between regions. The criteria used in the evaluation (see Table 1, p. 15) were organised within a four-part framework:

- **Regional context**—the regional 'background' or 'setting' in which planning and management occurs, including history, politics, geography and stakeholder culture.
- **Regional structures**—the 'hard' parts of regional planning infrastructure including organisations, governance structures, rules, policies and funding structures.
- **Processes**—the 'soft' parts of planning and management infrastructure including the mode of operation, procedures, and interactions between players and organisations.
- **Outcomes**—including enabling outcomes such as improved capacity of individuals and NRM institutions, on-ground delivery mechanisms and resource condition outcomes.

### Box 1: Regional NRM bodies and boards

The regional NRM body is the non-statutory regional organisation, endorsed by Federal, State and Territory governments with responsibility for developing regional NRM plans and regional investment strategies under the NAPSWQ and the Natural Heritage Trust for each of the defined NRM regions—there are 15 of these regions in Queensland (see Figure 2, p. 4.)

The board is generally the core management committee / decision-making structure for the regional NRM body. The board may be representative or skills-based in design or a mix of the two.

Most regional NRM bodies also include a broader stakeholder forum or council with much wider participation of stakeholders, interests, or sectors than the board and which operates as a more inclusive engagement forum.

## Synthesis of key findings and lessons

The main body of the report presents findings against the individual evaluation criteria, under the four-part framework described above. However the following discussion is a synthesis of those findings and the lessons and future directions arising.

### Thinking regionally, different regions and different models

Most stakeholders associated more strongly with *parts* of an NRM region, as in a district or sub-catchment, or with NRM issues that directly impacted on themselves, their industry or sector. This supports the views of interviewees that stakeholders generally had good understanding of NRM issues and impacts at the local level. However, this was more difficult to articulate at the regional level. There is a strong view that the complexity of NRM and the related regulatory environment is increasing. While general awareness levels are reported to be growing amongst stakeholders, this increasing regulatory complexity has created confusion for stakeholders.

#### *Stakeholders associated more strongly with parts of an NRM region*

History of prior arrangements in regions greatly influenced existing working relationships and how regional communities viewed NRM problems. Regional differences in demographics, employment, and land use also created diverse challenges for regional NRM bodies. Matching the planning model of the regional NRM body to the character of the region was a critical factor in developing effective regional arrangements. Regional NRM bodies played a diversity of roles across regions. These roles generally reflected the available ‘space’ left by other NRM service providers or activities and influenced by factors such as remoteness, access to services, impacts of prior planning, or perceived need for coordination of effort.

#### *Matching the planning model and role of the regional NRM body to the character of the region was critical*

Regional differences were seen in the approach to targeting funds, identifying priorities, the costs of engagement and in establishing meaningful monitoring systems. An acceptance of this regional diversity and a greater focus on the ends (e.g. achieving NRM outcomes), rather than set means, is required (e.g. compliance with guidelines). Insistence on uniformity risks inhibiting regional appropriateness and innovation. Simply, different modes of operation and roles are required to fill the different gaps in regional NRM arrangements that exist in regions.

### Politics, commitment, expectations and culture

An existing culture of collaboration for NRM was generally stronger in regions that had positive past experiences with collaborative efforts, provided incentives for land managers or that had a clear view of regional priorities. Where legacies of previous statutory or voluntary planning were negative, the culture of collaboration was reduced and more difficult to establish. Generally however, the new regional arrangements for NRM were fostering a collaborative culture among stakeholders. Regional bodies and state agency members perceived that this culture, and associated political commitment, was gradually improving over time within government, including in local governments.

Even so, amongst the three tiers of government, State government was perceived to be the least committed, politically, with high variability of commitment reported between and within agencies. This lack of certainty about that level of support undermined confidence and commitment within regional bodies and their stakeholders alike. Political commitment of peak industry bodies was also variable but strongest where there were clear industry interests progressed through the regional process.

#### **Box 2: Regional Coordination Groups**

Regional Coordination Groups are the regional-level mechanism by which government and community planners formally interact on the NRM planning and program delivery agenda in Queensland.

Four RCGs currently operate in Queensland, namely North, Central-West, South West and South East. Each of these groups consists of representatives from Australian Government and State Government agencies involved in NRM related business (e.g. EPA, DPI&F, NR&M).

Each coordination group is also responsible for managing the business relating to the regional NRM bodies within their region such as providing advice and support for NRM planning and investment proposals. Regional bodies also participate in those fora.

The Queensland State Government defines the purpose of RCGs as:

“...to foster strong community-government partnerships, coordinate whole of government processes and policies, and resolve policy inconsistencies at the regional level.”  
NR&M, 2004

[www.regionalnrm.qld.gov.au/about/regional/coordination\\_groups.html](http://www.regionalnrm.qld.gov.au/about/regional/coordination_groups.html)



Figure 2 Queensland's Natural Resource Management regions

***Perceptions of a lack of long-term political commitment from governments hampered regional cooperation and progress***

Local government alignment with regional NRM activity was patchy in some cases and varied greatly between and within regions. Again, where local governments had a history of working with NRM or catchment groups, current relationships were stronger. Commitment was also relatively stronger where regional NRM priorities matched local government responsibilities under statutes for NRM (e.g. pest and weed management and stock routes). In several regions local governments were directly involved as members on boards of regional NRM bodies and through links with Regional Organisations of Councils.

Factors limiting local government commitment and involvement included concerns over cost-shifting NRM responsibilities by State and federal governments onto local governments. Given the essential role that local governments play in local NRM and in community and development politics at regional level, finding ways to strengthen their engagement is critical to the success of the devolved regional partnership model in the long term.

***Local governments' concerns over cost-shifting of NRM responsibilities limited their commitment during the planning stage***

State agencies improved alignment of their activities with regional priorities during 2004-2005. This was often hampered however by poor disclosure of forward priorities and budgets by the agencies at state and regional levels in negotiations with regional bodies. The State's commitment to initiatives such as the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan was also a catalyst to more serious discussions on alignment of investment in areas such as water quality monitoring activities in reef regions. Undoubtedly the greatest factor in progressing alignment, however, was state government agencies involvement in developing regional NRM plans and particularly regional investment strategies. This occurred largely through the regional coordination groups and helped considerably to clarify roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, including cost-sharing arrangements for management.

Long-term political commitment and regional level operational support by agencies is necessary for large organisations such as state government agencies to genuinely align activities and resources. The NAPSWQ and NHT2 program rhetoric correctly acknowledged that this new approach would take time and that some regions would not meet all the program prescriptions in the first years of delivery. However, regional bodies and RCG members perceived that the lack of commitment by government to allow planning and implementation to 'cycle through' properly, constrained strategic planning, investment and partnership building.

In reality, regional bodies and regional arrangements, institutions and sectors needed a chance to catch up. The ten year review horizons associated with statutory resource planning for activities such as water resource planning in Queensland are more indicative of the political and resourcing commitments required to support the development, delivery and monitoring of regional scale resource planning activities.

***Expectations of government funding agencies were unrealistic given the complexity of the task***

Regional bodies and regionally-based state agency staff also felt they were under severe time constraints given the task set. No policy precedents or tested models existed for the voluntary arrangements in northern Australia, and regional body formation and planning dominated this initial phase of the evaluation. For example, considerable effort was expended from both statutory and regional body planners in 'translating' statutory objectives and policies into the regional NRM plans in a meaningful way. A proliferation of planning guidelines prepared by the State (often prescriptive, untimely and occasionally conflicting) also added complexity to the process. Tensions between government and regional bodies stirred in mid-late 2004. Regional bodies perceived that the State had intervened in NRM plan development at the "eleventh hour" overstepping the community consultation process.

Administrative tasks such as program reporting, consumed a great deal of time. As a result the core business of engagement, partnership development and investment design were greatly constrained. This administrative burden resulted in long time delays for regional groups followed by demands for short turn-around times. This did little to endear the process to regional stakeholders and potential investors. Government agencies' enthusiasm to get 'dollars out the door' strained efforts at the regional level to

implement good negotiation practices, limited co-development and review of NRM proposals and reduced the effectiveness of community stakeholder engagement.

***Costs to regional social capital from broken ‘commitments’ to regional community-based approaches would be significant***

Among this setting, however, most regional NRM bodies saw the process as the development of fundamental social infrastructure, with long-term goals fixed on future use and ongoing relationships. In particular, this was critical to achieving sign-up from industry and Indigenous interests so a longer and broader dialogue could be maintained, beyond the short-term imperative of plan development. In this context, it was widely reported by interviewees that the costs to regional social capital from broken ‘commitments’ to regional community-based approaches would be significant.

**Linking scales and activities and coordinating regional effort**

Improving the connectivity between management activities within regions and between local, regional and state levels was considered by interviewees as both a necessary means *and* a desired end of the regional NRM approach. Regional planners and agency staff reported gradual improvement in the coordination of statutory and voluntary activities in regions during the 18-month evaluation period.

Initially, significant effort was made to translate statutory objectives into NRM plans, including objectives from water resource plans, regional vegetation clearing codes, regional pest management plans, and, regional coastal management plans where developed. In some cases however, targets in regional NRM plans ‘raised the bar’ on statutory objectives. Regional bodies recognised the importance of statutory planning and government ‘backing’ to achieve the agreed targets in regional NRM plans. They were however equally determined to be differentiable from government planning efforts and to progress coordination efforts beyond ‘consistent’ targets between plans.

***Regional bodies recognised the contribution of statutory plans to achieving regional targets but also sought to distance themselves from ‘government planning’***

Moreover, the responsibility for driving regional coordination was widely accepted as a key role of regional NRM bodies, and one that many regional bodies expressed significant ownership over. The review of regional NRM plans highlighted the emphasis regional bodies place on ‘mapping’ regional stakeholder networks, alliances, service providers, and other activities and programs within regions.

There are two underlying issues with regional body ownership of the coordination role however. Firstly this allowed government planners to externalise their responsibilities for coordination in regions as it became “the regional bodies job to coordinate” and secondly regional bodies in this context could only rely on cooperative approaches to drive coordination with government business.

***There was strong agreement that governments need to address the coordination and integration of their own planning activities for resources and environment in regions***

There was strong agreement amongst RCG and regional body interviewees that for improved coordination to occur—or ‘alignment’ as the preferred term of agencies—serious efforts were needed by governments to coordinate and integrate their own planning activities for resources and environment. One commonly reported symptom of the regulatory and planning ‘silos’ was the multitude of fragmented property level planning requirements that existed. This fragmented approach to programs and funding currently impede regional planners’ ability to design and deliver integrated outcomes. As such, one of the challenges for state governments is to internalise the coordination ethic it promotes. This involves improved coordination of planning, implementation and monitoring activities associated with statutory processes in regions. It also involves commitment to working towards balancing competing or conflicting policy and planning agendas in regions.

There is a key emerging role for regional coordination groups to progress this at a regional level, in concert with state-level policy areas and regional NRM bodies. There is, however, strong resistance and indifference amongst sections of government such as the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation to seriously consider integrated planning approaches through this forum as opposed to basic NHT2 or NAPSWQ program needs.

The gulf that exists between regional development and NRM or environmental management agendas in regions is one of the more critical areas that must be addressed. Links between NRM activities and

regional development planning were still weak, undefined or absent in most regions. Interviewees stressed the need to balance state and regional development agendas and to consider competing interests and trade-offs at the regional scale.

***Links between regional NRM and regional development planning were still weak, undefined or absent in most regions***

Some regions had begun to explore models for linking regional NRM planning with regional development planning under Queensland's *Integrated Planning Act*, however the nature of that relationship in practical terms is still unclear and untested. There is however considerable scope to explore the sharing of monitoring, engagement and investment frameworks between these activities. This would also provide the basis to address many of the broader social and economic aspirations of stakeholders required to effectively implement regional NRM objectives currently limited by program scope.

***Benefits from coordination efforts include improved community engagement practices and stronger industry partnerships***

Some of the major benefits to date arising from coordination efforts in regions, associated with regional NRM planning process, have included focusing the debate on linking regional, state-wide and property scale monitoring frameworks. Agencies are also reported that their own statutory planning activities have benefited from improved community engagement practice in regions stemming from regional body processes. This included better interaction with Traditional Owners and partnerships with industry sectors.

Several factors constrained coordination efforts in regions. The more critical of these included an over-zealous focus on 'consistency between plans' by agencies. Government agencies also found the language of 'integration' generally unhelpful and threatening to their understanding of maintaining their own defined statutory responsibilities. On the other hand, 'alignment' of effort and resources was seen as a worthy goal. During the planning phase however this was hampered by the poor disclosure of agency priorities and budgets in regions. Incompatible timeframes, negative impacts of previous statutory planning and few requirements in the legislation to coordinate continued to constrain regional linkages.

Regional bodies and RCG members also recognised several risks associated with poor regional coordination. A critical one commonly identified was the potential for overlap or miss-match between property scale planning investments made by regional NRM bodies with adjustment packages administered by government or peak industry groups.

***Subregional links were seen as critical for engagement and implementation success in larger regions***

Clear and strong links with sub-regional and catchment scale activities were essential for ensuring effective planning and implementation, particularly in larger regions. Where the regional body had 'grown-out' of existing sub-regional NRM activities or where alliances already existed under NHT1 regional strategy group processes, these relationships were negotiated quite successfully. However where regional NRM boundaries were viewed as arbitrarily imposed or changed, relationships between regions and sub-regions were not as strong and occasionally antagonistic.

A successful strategy that several regions employed in response to meeting implementation needs was developing cross-regional or cross-jurisdictional agreements to clarify and enhance management. These cross-regional links were seen as most critical in remote and comparatively low-funded regions in the rangelands and northern savannas in Queensland.

The health of relationships between regional bodies and Landcare groups was a concern in several regions. In those regions, regional bodies believed they were seen by local Landcare groups to be co-opting the available funds and resources, contributing to strained relationships. As such the future role of Landcare in regional arrangements was still of concern in some regions.

## **New roles and responsibilities in the regional system**

One structure that evolved to help manage the growing need for government coordination was the regional coordination groups (RCGs). Most people interviewed believed that the four RCGs in Queensland had supported a more coordinated approach to program delivery in the regions. More

importantly, these structures provided a regular forum for agencies and regional bodies to discuss policy, program and planning business. Some agency staff perceived the role of RCGs as providing technical and policy-based advice to ensure ‘consistency’ with government business. Other agency members of RCGs viewed the structures as regional partnership forums. In practice, this dual role created considerable tensions during 2003–04 with RCGs seeking to both ‘partner’ regional bodies and act as ‘assessors’ for their governance arrangements, plans and investment proposals. By late 2004 most RCGs had moved to separate their partnering and advisory functions to resolve some of these tensions. Several agency staff indicated that state agencies in regions were “still getting used to their new roles” in partnering regional bodies.

***State agencies in regions were “still getting used to their new roles” in partnering regional bodies***

***A major factor in moving towards cooperative approaches in regions was clarification of roles and responsibilities***

Respective roles and responsibilities also need to be negotiated for regional monitoring, information management and technical advice. Roles and responsibilities still appeared to be unclear. This was in part because these were constantly evolving and, particularly when NRM plans moved into the implementation phase. The evaluation findings underlined the importance of negotiation as a primary tool for managing competing or conflicting stakeholder roles and aspirations at the regional scale. Negotiation was also critical in allowing stakeholders to explore alternative management, policy or investment options. Board and membership structures of regional NRM bodies and state agency Regional Coordination Group forums were valuable in providing a regular—if not always effective—arena for that negotiation, including negotiation between state government agencies. The approach adopted for target setting and priority-setting processes for regional NRM plan development provided an equally valuable negotiating opportunity in most regions.

***Negotiation of specific projects or funding proposals between sectors, agency staff and regional bodies were often the most practical and successful examples of collective action***

Perhaps not surprisingly, the development of regional investment strategies (as opposed to the NRM plans) was widely viewed as the critical point for collaboration by state agency RCG members. It was observed that on numerous occasions, the negotiation of specific projects or funding proposals between sectors, agency staff and regional bodies were often the most practical and successful examples of collective action. Focussing on shared priorities and practical management partnerships generally yielded the most productive outcomes.

As discussed in the previous section, regional bodies played a diversity of roles across regions. Apart from their core business role of developing regional plans and investment strategies, several acted as interpreters of government initiatives to regional stakeholders; and provided a focal point for integrated property planning initiatives in partnership with agencies and industries. Moreover, despite the NRM planning process still being under construction there was agreement amongst regional bodies and regional agency staff that regional bodies were establishing a legitimate mandate to deliver NRM initiatives in their regions.

***One of the critical benefits of regional bodies is providing alternative (non-regulatory) pathways to sustainable NRM outcomes in regions***

Importantly, regional bodies provided alternative (non-statutory) pathways for engaging stakeholders and providing those stakeholders with NRM information and resources. This also included potential pathways for land managers, to work towards meeting statutory compliance responsibilities. For example, regional body implementation staff reported that stakeholders in pastoral regions were particularly conscious of the connection between statutory requirements for pest and weed management and the opportunities provided by regional bodies to respond to those requirements. Regional bodies also provided the benefit of an ongoing engagement mechanism on incentives or information outside of the defined statutory consultation periods.

## **Bringing knowledge and information together for NRM**

The timing of this first benchmarking process, late 2003 to early 2005, was during the start-up and planning phase for most regional NRM bodies. As such, structures and processes for information collation and integrating knowledge become critical points of concern for the evaluation.

NRM planners widely reported that information systems in place in many regions were not fit to do the job. They also reported that data-sharing and technical support relied heavily on the personal commitment of, and relationships with, individuals in state government agencies. It was also apparent, particularly in northern Queensland regions, that state agency technical staff struggled to provide equitable levels of service across those regions, with the higher profile coastal regions generally capturing the lions share of support.

### ***Information systems in place in many regions were not fit to do the job***

In developing workable data sharing agreements, most regional bodies aligned themselves with particular government agencies, such as the Departments of Natural Resources & Mines (NR&M) or Primary Industries & Fisheries (DPI&F) in Queensland. In general terms however, the State Government is perceived to have backed away from its responsibility to provide natural resource information leaving regional NRM groups, in their view, to fund basic 'regional scale' resource condition assessment and monitoring.

### ***Queensland State Government is perceived to have backed away from providing basic natural resource information required for regional management...***

#### ***...The number of 'interim' resource condition targets in plans (i.e. targets to set targets) was indicative of the lack of suitable and available data on resource condition***

The number of 'interim' resource condition targets in regional NRM plans (i.e. targets to set targets) was indicative of the lack of *suitable* and available data on resource condition. An absence of satellite imagery and quality mapping at appropriate scales were widely reported as critical gaps. Other common gaps in the planning information base determined from a review of NRM plans included basic groundwater and surface water quality data on sediments and nutrients; rangelands' biodiversity data; quantification of landscape change impacts on climate change and regional carbon budgets; understanding the distribution and role of fire; understanding links between socio-economic trends in resource industries and capacity to pay; and, 'mapping' of social or cultural values in landscapes.

#### ***... in the two years since the release of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, water quality monitoring programs in reef catchments are still being debated.***

Roles and responsibilities for resource condition monitoring in regions were largely undefined or unclear at best. While there was a common belief that state and national agencies were responsible for long-term resource condition monitoring, coherent programs were not evident. For example, in the two years since the release of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, water quality monitoring programs in reef catchments are still being debated. The potential for coordinated roles for government, community and industry to regional monitoring systems is also yet to be resolved.

Apart from the consequent lack of consistent information to measure resource condition changes and the success of interventions, governments have created cynicism in the regions about their competence on what appears a relatively straightforward technical activity.

Given the poor availability of suitable data in some regions, planners drew quite heavily on the skills and knowledge of regional stakeholders. This knowledge, mostly captured through the plan consultation process, was reported to be highly useful in ground-truthing available scientific information and improving the management applicability of that information to targets and actions at the local level.

Two noteworthy issues arose however with the use of stakeholder knowledge. Firstly, in most cases the process used to capture and integrate different stakeholders knowledge (e.g. pastoralists, Traditional Owners etc) obscured those different 'voices' in the plan. A second issue arose when planners in one savanna region found the funding rules and conditions around ownership of intellectual property presented barriers to the acceptable use of Indigenous knowledge in the project development and implementation.

***The expertise of rural industry groups as implementation partners was also widely valued by regional bodies***

The expertise of rural industry groups as implementation partners was also widely valued in the design of incentives, communication strategies and property planning investments. Landcare networks were also identified in some regions as 'relationship experts' for implementation.

***Expertise from outside the regional NRM body was invaluable in developing regional plans***

Also important was the ability of regions to access external knowledge providers. This expertise was drawn from a range of sources including agencies themselves, research institutions or short-term outsourcing to consultants. Several regions also established longer term strategic partnerships with research providers such as Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs), the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) or the Moreton Bay Partnerships. Access to these skills greatly improved the application of existing resource data to the planning task at hand in several regions. These 'third-party' players also helped overcome the bureaucratic hurdles often faced by regional NRM bodies in securing data directly from state agencies, particularly in the start-up phase of planning where data sharing agreements or structures were not clearly articulated. Conversely several regions indicated that poor access to research providers hampered their plan development efforts. Despite the benefits gained from these associations, regional bodies reported considerable difficulties in 'managing scientists' and frustration with the scientific communities unwillingness to nominate resource condition targets.

***Scientists were often unwilling to nominate resource condition targets***

Setting regional priorities proved one of the most difficult aspects to the process of developing NRM plans. Management of multiple values and expectations, and large volumes of data "with lots of holes in it" was problematic for several regions. Approaches for setting regional priorities ranged from structured multi-criteria analysis and use of environmental benefits indices, to consensus techniques, technical forums or combinations of these. Regional NRM plans, however, rarely showed how NRM priorities related to particular locations in order to avoid the perception that particular industry or land use would be unfairly targeted. As a result, spatial priority setting more commonly occurred through the design of implementation frameworks negotiated with industry sectors or sub-regional players.

***NRM plans rarely showed how priorities related to particular locations ...spatial priorities for action were generally set later through the design of implementation frameworks***

Areas that were problematic for regional groups included applying decision-making technologies in complex, community-based settings. This included considering Indigenous management aspirations equitably in the priority setting process. Apart from better decision-making approaches, better strategic guidance would be provided if the state and national governments had coherent NRM strategies and priorities of their own as a framework.

Regional bodies and state agencies considered property management planning as a critical tool for integrating knowledge at the local level that reflects regional priorities and management aspirations. As such, it was widely promoted as a cornerstone of implementation over the next three years.

***Property management planning was considered a critical tool for integrating knowledge at the local level***

## **Capacity of planners, managers and stakeholders**

There were significant improvements in social capital including new networks and business approaches, increased respect and credibility of regional community-based NRM and enhancement of individuals', organisations' and agencies' capacity during 2004-5. Considerable human and social transaction costs were also incurred during that time.

A major factor in incurring those costs was the rapidity of changing policy, program and management requirements during the start-up and planning phases and the pressure on regional players to respond.

***The ability to respond to rapidly changing operating environments in regions was critical***

In responding to that rapidly changing operating environment in regions, regional NRM bodies worked to keep ahead of emerging initiatives, and kept their stakeholders informed through their engagement networks. Sharing experiences and tactics with other regional bodies provided important sources of

learning and skill sharing during this time. Structures such as the *Regional Groups Collective* were critical to this. Regional bodies and regional coordination groups reported they are rethinking their operation and composition to ‘gear up’ for implementation and monitoring functions. Over the evaluation period, regional NRM bodies and agency staff on Regional Coordination Groups demonstrated an increasing capability to be adaptive and responsive. This included conducting self-initiated reviews of their representative structures, sectoral agreements, terms of reference or engagement approaches. NRM plans were generally explicit about how adaptive management approaches would be used to review their plans and investment strategies.

***Regional bodies sought to build on stakeholder capabilities within their region***

As part of the planning process, regional bodies made a concerted effort to understand the social capital and stakeholder capabilities within their region. This often contrasted with funding agency views of regional stakeholders as empty vessels that needed their capacity ‘built’. In most cases regional groups perceived funding and program prescriptions as barriers to innovation and effective relationships with stakeholders. Regional bodies stressed the importance of involving their stakeholders early in any new initiative as well as a mediating conflicting aspirations between stakeholder groups with as effective strategies for engagement.

***Involving stakeholders early in new initiatives and mediating conflicting aspirations between stakeholder groups were effective strategies for engagement.***

Regional bodies and their governance structures were generally inclusive of the diverse regional interests. In several regions however there were ongoing challenges in securing the involvement of conservation, Indigenous and marine interests during 2004–05. There was significant progress reported in establishing a sound basis for longer-term partnerships with Indigenous people through the regional NRM process. Tight timeframes impacted negatively on Indigenous peoples’ participation. Program requirements also provoked frustration as they disaggregated environmental issues from human health and employment, that Indigenous groups felt were equally important and relevant.

***Major resource using sectors such as tourism, Department of Defence and urban communities were notably absent from the table***

Major resource using sectors such as tourism, Department of Defence and urban communities were also notably absent from relevant regional processes and plans. Even when pressures and benefits of tourism use were recognised, the tourism sector’s voice was difficult to identify and was repeatedly referred to as an external pressure on the resource base. Department of Defence absence is significant due to its role as a major land manager and investor in NRM process. The role of urban communities, as resource users and consumers, was often undervalued with NRM seen predominantly as a rural problem.

Local government involvement in the regional NRM continues to present a challenge as many local governments lack sufficient staffing and resources to participate effectively in regional NRM business.

***Many local governments lack sufficient staffing and resources to participate effectively in regional NRM business***

Two main models of regional NRM body governance emerged. The first, a representational approach, encouraged stakeholder support and ownership. The success of the representational model sometimes depended on the level of organisation and resourcing within the sectors themselves. Arguably, it was easier for peak industry groups to nominate and support the role of a representative than Indigenous or conservation interests in the region. NRM boards judged to have good stakeholder representation did struggle to ‘think regionally’ when trying to reach consensus on key NRM issues, particularly during the Board’s priority setting.

The second, a skills-based model, improved decision-making efficiencies and the ability for boards to reflect the interests of the ‘region’ as distinct from sectoral interests. There were limitations however with boards not making best possible use of members’ skills as well as risks of being perceived as exclusive, and with poor accountability to stakeholders. Importantly, skills-based approaches also invariably required ‘additional’ mechanisms to maintain input and draw direction from the broader stakeholder community.

***Skills-based NRM boards invariably required ‘additional’ mechanisms to draw direction from the broader stakeholder community.***

The board was not the only mechanism used to engage different interests in regions. Regional bodies found it more appropriate—given sectors’ management interests and capacities—to engage at the sub-regional level or on specific project initiatives. Governance arrangements were also in a state of flux as NRM bodies moved from planning to implementation and as board members’ understanding of their roles and responsibilities matured.

The evaluation also considered the adequacy of resourcing available to regional bodies. Interviewees recognised the competitive nature of funding resources, however, only half believed there was adequate resourcing for a strategic approach. The high cost of travel for large-area regions was identified as a major factor in limiting this strategic capability.

There were several common skill sets that were regularly reported as difficult to secure in regions. These included extension, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and related data management, good facilitation skills, corporate governance and technical environmental management skills.

The difficulty for regional agency staff to equitably service NRM regions was generating a ‘poor cousin’ syndrome in northern and western regions in particular. Regional agency staff also expressed concern about the high levels of unrecognised in-kind support required during the planning phase.

***Cross-regional agreements became important to resource implementation activities in remote regions***

Regional bodies used several strategies to overcome these limitations. These included building their local communities’ skills to implement, developing alliances with agency or industry partners. Regions also harnessed skills and support from other regional bodies (acting as service provider role) through cross-regional agreements. These were particularly common to resource implementation activities in remote regions such as Cape York, the Gulf regions, and Desert Channels.

## **Making things happen: towards NRM outcomes**

Many interviewees said it was too early to make a judgement on the outcomes of the process, even about the success of the board establishment and planning phase. Respondents indicated the implementation of sub-catchment PMP initiatives were examples of effective on-ground delivery outcomes to date. However at the time of the interviews (October 2004), a significant number of respondents believed there had been no such outcomes in their regions during this stage. Many respondents reported frustration that the whole board formation and planning process had prevented adequate action on the ground during the period, notwithstanding some valuable *Priority Action Proposal* investments and other ongoing projects.

Despite the negative connotation often given to “just more planning”, the majority of regional body and state agency respondents believed that the preparation of regional NRM plans and investment strategies were, in themselves, significant outcomes and not just necessary steps to “get the funds”. Virtually all respondents commented favourably on the strategic focus they were required to adopt compared with earlier approaches that tended to spread effort too thinly.

There was considerable confidence among regional players that the infrastructure was now in place to deliver regional priorities, at the same time as new approaches were developed for property management planning, application of incentives, and other market-based instruments. Regional plans demonstrated a major improvement in the working knowledge of and commitment to developing monitoring frameworks that connect with local, state and national needs.

***There is confidence among regional players that the infrastructure is now in place to deliver on regional priorities***

For even the most advanced regional body or set of management arrangements, it was too early to measure on ground and resource condition outcomes. However almost all regional players interviewed expected that the process would result in improvements in resource and environmental conditions. In the short term, there was a common expectation that management arrangements would start to stabilise resource condition and/or prevent further losses. Some people were not sure whether regions had the resources to improve the assets without bigger investments and considerable change in resource

managers' attitudes. Regional players were also aware of the potential for external factors such as climate, policy change and markets to influence outcomes.

Regional planners were concerned with avoiding imposing unfair burdens on land managers and regional industries. There was some evidence from plan reviews that implementation processes were likely to adopt measures to minimise negative social and economic consequences of proposed interventions. Several plans committed to undertake social impact assessment to inform implementation of specific management action targets.

***Several plans committed to undertake social impact assessment to inform implementation of specific management action targets.***

In larger regions in particular, strong relationships between regional NRM bodies and sub-regional and catchment scale activities generally supported well-defined implementation and planning roles. In many regions the presence of prior sub-regional organisations resulted in a significant head start by providing critical 'social infrastructure' for engagement on NRM plan development and implementation. The success of this arrangement, however, depended on the ability of regional NRM bodies to negotiate these roles with sub-regional groups in a fair way. Pre-existing sub-regional structures in some regions were also found to constrain stakeholders in thinking more regionally and in a small number of cases confounded the establishment of an effective regional process.

***A common view of regional bodies and agency staff was that management "needs to come together at the landscape level"***

Resource management partnerships for monitoring, engagement and for property-scale and sub-regional implementation of sustainable land management practices emerged in most regions. These partnerships were between industries, regional bodies and state agencies, and were driven in part by a common view expressed by regional bodies and regional agency staff that management "needs to come together at the landscape level".

***Management partnerships were most effective when based on a specific issue, sector, place or a shared problem***

Management partnerships were generally most effective where parties developed specific funding proposals or agreements based on issue, sector, place or a specific shared problem. Recognising stakeholder management aspirations (Indigenous or rural industry), or responsibilities under statutes (State and Local governments) proved fundamental i.e. recognising and working with 'self-interest'.

***A high proportion of management actions in NRM plans were to improve regional monitoring systems***

Regional bodies currently face real challenges in adequately monitoring return on regional investment, where regional bodies believed 'return' to include sustainable production, equity or cultural outcomes as well as improvements in natural resource condition. Demonstrating and attributing causal links between investment and return is highly problematic in a complex environment. As a result, a high proportion of management actions in NRM plans were allocated to improving monitoring systems although government investors were keener for evidence of on-ground change.

***Demonstrating and attributing causal links between investment and return is highly problematic***

Tight accountability to government conflicted with the need for regional bodies to also partner government, and achieve the return on regional investment. It is a difficult balancing act for regional bodies to maintain accountability to their stakeholders while avoiding perceptions of "becoming part of government".

## **Focus for Stage 2 of the evaluation**

The project team will continue to work with our partners to track progress through to mid-2006. The regional NRM process is evolving from the formative and planning phases to the implementation and action phase.

This report deals largely with the Queensland experience. In 2005–06, benchmarking in NT and WA will also be conducted more explicitly. The second 'benchmarking' process will involve a survey of

regional body and regional agency staff. The evaluation will also seek to expand to include other important regional planning activities and to engage with a broader range of industry, community and government players. The development of several in-depth case studies involving regions from all three savanna jurisdictions will support this objective. Regional investment patterns and trends will also be considered.

Potential case studies, based on emerging themes and key findings from stage 1 of the evaluation, include:

- Adaptive management of water quality
- Role of the pastoral industry in regional planning
- Regional approaches to stakeholder engagement
- Australian Defence Force involvement in regional NRM
- Indigenous participation in NRM monitoring and evaluation
- Biodiversity information in regional scale planning, and
- Improving links between NRM and regional development planning.

**Table 1: Criteria for evaluation of regional NRM planning arrangements**

Criteria	Explanation
<b>Context criteria</b>	<b>Recognises that implementation of regional NRM is affected by a wide range of environmental, economic, social, policy/institutional and technological factors</b>
C1 Thinking 'regionally'	Regional stakeholders have a clear identification with the NRM region, an acceptance of its NRM issues and are generally thinking 'regionally'.
C2 Stakeholder culture and commitment	Regional stakeholders recognise, practice, and support participation and collaboration that generates willingness for learning and change. Political commitment is present among key regional stakeholders.
C3 Understanding NRM	Recognition by regional stakeholders of the 'multi-dimensional nature' of NRM, i.e. social, economic, environmental and institutional/political dimensions.
C4 Recognising regional diversity & complexity	Diversity and complexity of the social, economic, ecological and institutional characteristics of the region are recognised and widely understood.
<b>Structure criteria</b>	<b>Addresses the rules and institutional arrangements relating to regional NRM</b>
S1 Coherent policy and governance structures	The degree to which policy, program, governance (and legislative) structures agree in intent, are consistent and logically connected.
S2 Aligned institutions	Institutions have a high degree of integration and adaptiveness to support regional priorities.
S3 Roles and responsibilities	Roles and responsibilities in regional NRM arrangements are clearly defined and understood.
S4 Participation and engagement structures	Integrity and inclusiveness of participation and engagement structures is apparent.
S5 Adequate regional resourcing	Resources are adequate to support regional NRM planning and long-term certainty exists regarding future funding.
S6 Monitoring return on investment	Mechanisms are in place to monitor and assess returns on investment.
S7 Structures for integrating knowledge	Structures that support data and information sharing and integration in planning. Effective information and knowledge management arrangements including access to external expertise, science and science providers.
<b>Process criteria</b>	<b>Addresses the activities, strategies, operations and relationships that define and influence regional NRM</b>
P1 Processes for integrating knowledge and values	Regional process and tools that support the integration of different types of information, knowledge and values including target setting, priority setting, and engagement processes.
P2 Capacity to participate	Capacity exists for all players to participate in regional planning, management or implementation processes.
P3 Procedural fairness	Processes that support regional NRM are widely perceived as fair.
P4 Responsive and adaptive regions	Processes are adaptable and responsive to changes in understanding, values, priorities and external pressures. Strategies and approaches used to facilitate change.
P5 Linking scales and activities	Processes support and exhibit connectivity within and between scales
<b>Outcomes criteria</b>	<b>Reflects the outputs or deliverables produced and impacts from regional NRM to date</b>
O1 Improved social capital of planners, managers and participants	Outcomes associated with enhanced individual capabilities, credibility, on-going learning, networks for management and planning and ownership.
O2 Effective and connected institutions	Connectivity between state, regional, sub-regional and local activities; and effective and connected processes and structures at the regional scale.
O3 Improved resource condition	Condition of priority natural, social, cultural and economic resources in regions.

