

ENGAGING COASTAL COMMUNITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION – BUILDING SAND CASTLES OR TURNING THE TIDE?

Introduction

About 50% of Australian addresses or population are located within 7 km of the shore, and that population decreases very rapidly with increasing distance from the shoreline. Further to this about 6.0% of Australian addresses are situated within 3 km of the coastline (Chen and McAneny 2006).

Most of Australia's population is concentrated in two coastal regions - the south-east and east, and the south-west of Australia (ABS 2010). Outside of capital cities the largest population growth generally occurred along the Australian coast in 2009-10. The seaside LGA of Wollongong experienced the largest growth outside of Sydney (up 2,300 people), followed by Lake Macquarie (1,800) and Newcastle (1,500) (ABS 2011).

Australia's non-metropolitan coastal landscape is being transformed by the 'sea change' population movement led by alternative life-stylers, downshifter, economic migrants, and retirees. A defining quality of this amenity migration is that migrants move for lifestyle, rather than jobs, choosing places for their natural amenity, climate, recreation opportunities, and affordable housing (Gurran 2008). The regions that have experienced the most sustained growth over the past 20 years have been these high amenity 'sea change' coastal regions which mostly extend far enough inland to pick up many of the high amenity 'hill change areas' as well (Newton 2006).

Caring for our Coast

A funding submission, "*Engaging NSW Communities in Coastline Conservation*", was prepared by the five coastal Catchment Management Authorities in NSW in response to the Caring for our Country Business Plan. The submission was successful and a project known as "Caring for our Coast" commenced in October 2009 with the \$3.5m Stage 1 being completed at the end of June 2011. Stage 2 (\$1.35m) runs from July 2010 to June 2012.

The purpose of the Caring for our Coast program was to engage people in coastal communities and build their capacity to rehabilitate, restore and conserve coastal environments on public land along the entire NSW coastline. Caring for our Coast involved some 94 regional and three state-wide projects, 424 coastal community organisations and over 2,600 volunteers. A poster presentation of the program is on display at the combined CMAs' stand at this conference.

Caring for our Coast Evaluation

The coastal CMAs engaged Environmental Evidence Australia to undertake an external evaluation of Stage 1 of the Caring for our Coast program. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Determine how the Caring for our Coast project has contributed to the relevant Caring for our Country targets with a particular focus on community engagement
- Assess the ‘appropriateness’ of program architecture and implementation processes to deliver NRM and community engagement outcomes
- Inform continuous improvement actions for the delivery of Stage 2 and future similar programs that the CMAs may deliver.

The overall key evaluation question for the evaluation was:

“How effective and appropriate was the Caring for our Coast program in delivering NRM and community engagement outcomes?”

The evaluation of the effectiveness and appropriateness of *Caring for our Coast* was undertaken at two scales – the overall program and at the individual project scale for a representative sample of projects (42) selected for the evaluation.

Three overall key evaluation questions structure the evaluation based on the above:

1. How effective was the overall program in delivering NRM and community outcomes?
2. How effective were projects in delivering NRM and community outcomes (project scale)?
3. How appropriate was the program architecture and implementation processes to deliver NRM and community engagement outcomes?

Collection and Analysis of data

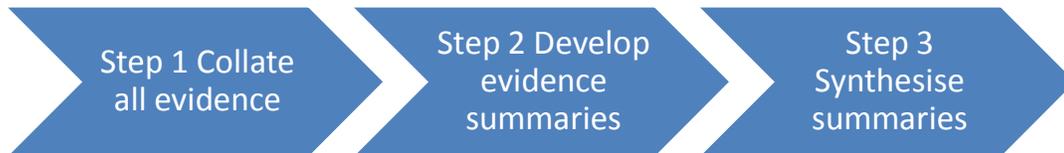
Evidence for the evaluation was collected from two primary sources – textual documents from the CMAs and through conducting semi-structured interviews. Evidence was collated over the period May to July 2011 including conducting over ninety semi-structured interviews with CMA staff, project partners - the coastal public land managers (local councils and state government agencies), the National Marine Science Centre, and some community organisations) and project participants (i.e. volunteers from a range of Coastcare, Landcare, Bushcare and other community groups).

Documents collected included CMA project reports, program final report and independent commissioned reports on projects such as the Coastal Volunteers Forum. Interviews were conducted with 93 participants (11 more than originally planned for) using a semi-structured interview style that allowed interview participants to discuss more detail of key aspects of their involvement. The interviews questions were based on the evaluation questions agreed on in an Evaluation Plan developed with the CMAs.

Two sets of interviews were developed and used based on the relevance of the evaluation questions: one set of questions that were relevant to the program managers (CMA staff) and a second set that were relevant to the project partners and participants. Many questions were the same between the two sets.

A repository of the evidence used (transcriptions and evidence summaries) was developed and is held by each of the CMAs for their regional projects.

The evidence analysis process can be summarized as follows:



Step 1 Collate all evidence

The primary task in collating all the evidence was to ensure that all transcriptions had been completed for the digital recordings. Interview transcripts were edited for errors and omissions with final version being saved. In one case a transcript was provided back to the interviewee for checking and endorsement. The interview transcript totalled over 1,350 pages.

External literature was used from conducting searches of large literature databases and internet search engines for two sections of the report that present a review of literature on two key contextual areas of the evaluation. These were a) a review of the use of devolved grants for community environmental works in Australia and b) a review of the significance and pressures on the NSW coastal environment.

Step 2 Develop evidence summaries

A template was developed for evidence summaries. The template contained information about the relevant key evaluation question, sub-evaluation questions and evidence sources including interview questions. For each interview a hyperlink to the interview transcript was embedded in the template serving to save time in accessing the transcript.

Each evidence summary template was then populated by systematically searching through each interview transcript, using key word searches to find relevant passages of text. Relevant text was copied from the transcript to the evidence summary template. In some cases all interview transcripts were required to be read to extract the relevant evidence.

A single document (of some 540 pages) was developed representing a collation of all of the evidence summaries.

Step 3 Synthesise evidence summaries

The last task in evidence analysis was to synthesise evidence from the evidence summaries for each of the evaluation questions. This task involved using each of the evidence summaries that were relevant for answering the evaluation question. Two approaches were required for this task according to the two different scales that the evaluation is focussed on – a) effectiveness and appropriateness at the program scale and b) effectiveness at the individual project scale.

Evaluation results were able to be presented for each evaluation question relating to the program scale. Several evaluation questions however had to be combined in order to answer the project scale evaluation component. It was decided that in the interest of keeping the project scale analysis comprehensible that it would be presented in a summary format.

For each of the key areas of project effectiveness (attracting young participants to undertake NRM activities; delivering the community engagement outcomes; delivering the building community capacity targets through regional NRM organisations; and enabling the community to undertake works that otherwise would not have been done) results were presented in a tabular form showing a graphic of the overall project effectiveness, key summary dot points of 'what worked well' and areas for improvement and some overall summary points.

Overview of findings

The program met or exceeded all the Caring for our Country NRM and community engagement output targets even though the delivery timeframe was substantially reduced due to administrative delays on commencement of the program. The processes used (the focus of this evaluation) at a program and project level were generally seen by CMA staff, project partners and project participants as effective and appropriate for delivery of the program outcomes.

The delivery model used for community engagement through the use of devolved funds was generally seen as appropriate and was effective in delivering the program targets. In particular the engagement of project partners (Local Councils, State Agencies, Landcare Support Groups) and contractors (specialist bush regeneration teams) was also seen as appropriate and effective. Bush regeneration teams contracted to assist volunteer groups play a key role not only in delivering the target NRM outputs for projects, but also in skilling, educating, directing and motivating volunteers, often providing them with a clearer direction and greater hope for achieving future outcomes.

Although two different delivery models were used in the program - targeted and non-targeted project locations - there was no significant difference in the achievement of NRM or community engagement targets between these two models. The different delivery approaches however do provide an ability to tailor delivery mechanisms to communities that have varying levels of 'maturity' regarding engagement or understanding of environmental programs.

The evaluation suggests that CMAs provide a logical unit for devolving funds to natural resource management organisations as they have state wide coverage, have well developed project management, financial and human resource systems and staff expertise, have well established and extensive partnerships and committed and informed staff.

In addition to this the CMAs contributed significant in-kind contributions to the program through the provision of technical advice and expertise and administrative support to project partners. The total CMA contribution to the project was \$1.4m, while the total cash and in-kind contributions from all project partners was \$4.74m, including almost \$1m in cash. This contribution represents a project partners' contribution of \$1.40 for every \$1 of Australian Government funds.

There is a considerable administrative burden however placed upon CMA staff who managed the delivery of the program, resulting in some cases in frustration on behalf of project partners or participants that CMA staff were unable to spend more time 'on site'.

Many lessons to inform the planning and implementation of similar future programs were learnt. These included:

- The value of engaging well skilled contractors to undertake the physically demanding "initial hit" and in enthusing and motivating volunteers.
- The importance of engaging local champions as an effective community engagement mechanism.
- The importance of utilising skills outside the NRM sector to engage the community such as social networking, IT, communication and media skills.
- The value in understanding a particular community before a community engagement mechanism is employed. This includes for example what existing social networks exist within a community (i.e. sporting, religious or social clubs) and what appeals to youth within the community.
- The importance of providing feedback to project partners and participants as a mechanism for adaptive management and increasing morale.
- The need for greater local and regional recognition of the contribution of the volunteer network of people working unpaid on public land.

The interviews, being based on gathering information largely about people's experience of their involvement in the process of the Caring for Our Coast program, meant that the evidence was based largely on the opinions of those people interviewed. People's opinion may be influenced by a multitude of factors including specific events, personal dealings with individuals or factors outside the influence of the program. In some cases these opinions may be well founded and in other cases have no factual basis. Regardless of this, people's perceptions influence their behaviour and hence their actions and contribution to programs such as the Caring for Our Coast program.

An important finding from the evaluation was that CMAs may need to address some key areas that are misinforming some people's views and attitudes regarding involvement in environmental programs. These included areas such as funding conditions, funding processes and CMA roles and responsibilities.

In answering the three key evaluation questions a set of a further 24 more specific evaluation questions were developed that framed the evaluation. With a focus on what worked well and what could be improved, the evaluation findings can be summarised as follows.

How effective was the overall program in delivering NRM and community outcomes?

The program met (or nearly met) or exceeded all the Caring for our Country targets within a reduced project delivery timeframe. This was a significant achievement and is sound evidence of effectiveness. Beyond the target outputs, the program enabled a range of environmental outcomes to be achieved that were generally seen as being locally significant, such as restoration of wildlife corridors, restoration of endangered ecological communities and providing a network of 'weed free' patches along the NSW coastline.

The achievement of these on-ground outcomes in such a short timeframe also generally provided volunteers with renewed enthusiasm, new skills and knowledge and new networks to enable them to undertake the future task of maintenance with greater confidence. Many volunteer groups were able to see the value of well skilled, specialist contractor teams in providing the initial big impact work. This was often too physically demanding for many volunteers and required specialist skills for example to remove weeds on cliff faces or rough terrain.

The effectiveness of achievement of on-ground outcomes can be heavily influenced by ecological processes and cycles. These include natural events like fires, floods or disease or weed life cycles. The ability to capitalise on these events may be increased through greater flexibility in funding timeframes. Similarly the effectiveness of community engagement outcomes can be increased through careful planning to match activities with existing community or school programs or events. Planning to enable a good understanding of the nature of targeted communities, how they function and who are the local champions could also increase the effectiveness of community engagement.

CMAs were generally seen as playing a key role in the delivery of NRM and community outcomes on coastal public lands through the roles that they played in securing funds, provision of project management, technical and administrative expertise, engagement of partners, and support for community volunteers that work to improve and maintain coastal natural resources.

How effective were projects in delivering NRM and community outcomes (project scale)?

With few exceptions all project delivered the target outputs within the project timeframe according to the contracts agreed.

Some key issues surfaced in the delivery of projects including mechanisms to engage youth in environmental restoration projects. It was the one area of the evaluation that drew the most blanks from those interviewed regarding solutions. The use of specialist 'roving hit teams' was considered a possible solution that has been tried with some success. Other engagement mechanisms included the provision of some reward, creation of a competitive atmosphere between groups, the use of role models and champions.

A common sentiment was that project effectiveness could have increased through greater flexibility in funding timeframes as discussed above.

Clearly the provision of funds made a significant difference to whether the project activities would have been carried out or not or carried out to the same extent. The funding also provided an opportunity to engage contractors as discussed above.

How appropriate was the program architecture and implementation process in delivering NRM and community engagement outcomes?

Generally the program architecture was seen as being appropriate for delivery of the NRM and community engagement outcomes. As a key part of this, the use of devolved grants was generally seen as appropriate. This was supported by evidence from three areas – use of different sized grants, project assessment process and the competitive approach. Overwhelmingly the application process was seen as straightforward and CMAs provided adequate assistance.

The mix of small and larger grant sizes enabled an incentive for smaller groups and larger organisations to become engaged in the program. While large grants enabled the engagement of organisations that were able to value add in kind contributions through well established organisational systems and skilled staff, the smaller grants enabled small community groups to have confidence in the handling and governance of project funds.

While the project selection process was generally seen as robust, transparent and repeatable some concerns regarding bias towards more literate groups was evident.

The engagement mechanism model used whereby the CMAs contracted project partners, who in turn engaged volunteer groups was also generally seen as an appropriate model given the strengths that each party was able to contribute. For example Councils as project partners were able to contribute in some cases their own bush regeneration teams or engage skilled teams that they had good relationships with. Councils were also able to use administrative capacity and purchasing power to gain necessary insurances for volunteer groups.

The achievements that have been made by the Caring for Our Coast program are a significant contribution to the long-term incremental restoration efforts required in many coastal areas. The critical on-going maintenance to prolong the successes achieved in engaging the community and achieving on-ground outcomes will be largely undertaken by the network of volunteers providing countless hours of labour and local knowledge. The enthusiasm and motivation of this army is however vulnerable to erosion from factors such as reduced participation, lack of recognition, attrition of knowledge and reduced morale. The Caring for Our Coast program showed that devolved funds were a significant factor in overcoming many of these factors.

We need to ensure that that future funding is well informed, well timed, on-going and capitalises on the most effective model for delivery so that the tide of community support is maintained and that success achieved from programs such as Caring for Our Coast are not merely sandcastles that are washed away without a trace.

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