

Integration: Policy Development and Regional Implementation

A synthesis of papers contributed under this topic, prepared as a Discussant for the Land and Water Australia Integration Symposium, May 5–6 2004

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I've attempted to synthesise the key ideas of five papers prepared by practitioners attempting to develop or implement integrated natural resource management (INRM) at the national, state and regional scales. Four of the five papers reflect on INRM at the state and regional scales. Each of these papers is based on experience in Victoria. Obviously this prevents learning from inter-state comparisons. However, this short-coming is counterbalanced by the opportunity to learn from the reflections of practitioners working at different scales in the one jurisdiction.

I begin by introducing each of the authors/team of authors. Much of the focus of this set of papers is on regional delivery of NRM, so I think it is also useful to provide a brief outline of what these regional bodies are required to do. I then explore the practitioners' views of integration, including some description of their efforts to progress integration, how well they think integration is working, and the gaps or opportunities for enhancing integration that they identify. I've attempted to do this using as headings the key elements of integration that I think the authors identify. In saying what I'm proposing to do it is also important to say what is not being undertaken. I'm not providing an assessment of the success of regional NRM in Australia.

What follows is as much my perspective as that of the five authors/teams in that I've imposed a structure for the synthesis, interpreted the authors' text, and been selective in highlighting some points/issues and not others.



THE AUTHORS

Harry Abrahams is a senior Australian government public servant working as part of the inter-departmental Natural Resources Management Team on delivery of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) in partnership with the state governments and regional bodies.

Brian Coffey and Andrew Major are Victorian public servants contributing to the development of a state-wide framework for INRM within the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). Brian and Andrew reflect on their experience with this high-level policy review project commenced in 2003.

Alistar Phillips, Kim Lowe and Shirley Diez are Victorian public servants contributing to policy development and program implementation within DSE. Alistar, Kim and Shirley draw heavily on their experience with Victoria's Rural Land Stewardship project.

Bill O'Kane is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority (GBCMA) and has worked in NRM in that catchment since 1986.

Geoff Park and Jennifer Alexander work for the North Central Catchment Management Authority and focus on their experience with biodiversity action planning (BAP) as a tool to achieve multiple NRM outcomes.

INTEGRATION THROUGH REGIONAL NRM BODIES

Every paper refers to the work of the regional bodies established by the various states and it is either explicitly stated, as by Abrahams, or implied, that these organisations and the partnerships they build, the priorities that they establish, and the investment of state and Australian government resources that they guide are critical to INRM in Australia.

These regional NRM bodies are expected to represent the range of regional stakeholders and are required to develop regional plans and investment strategies that set out how the land, water and biodiversity of the region are to be managed. Each plan and investment strategy has to be endorsed by state and Australian government agencies prior to receipt of funding through NHT or NAP and plan implementation. While there are state and regional differences, these groups are typically asked to:

1. articulate their vision and objectives, (Where do we want to go?);
2. describe their catchment condition and identify the key regional challenges, (Where are we now?);
3. explain how they will implement their strategy, (How do we go forward?);

4. identify targets for the implementation of management actions and for improvements in resource condition that will enable the assessment of progress towards plan objectives, (How do we know what we have achieved and learned?).

PERSPECTIVES ON INTEGRATION

Holistic and systematic

There seems to be agreement amongst the authors with the view of Phillips et al that INRM involves the management of the impact of people on natural resources in a way that is holistic in that it includes all elements, and is systematic in that there is an attempt to consider the interactions between these elements. Coffey/Major explain that integration is required to deal with the complexity of issues, the interconnectivity of parts of our environment, and the extent that the impacts of actions/interventions are often cumulative and irreversible and can vary spatially and temporally.

Coffey/Major, Park/Alexander and Phillips et al highlight that the shift from an issues to an assets-based (and the goods and services they provide) approach to planning has been/will be critical to enhanced integration of NRM in Victoria. Their view is that the issues-based approach of the past tended to be reductionist, with a focus on addressing the causes of single issues, often ignoring the connectivity of issues. O’Kane adds the point that investment in NRM are unlikely to be justified by benefit-cost analysis if the focus is on a single issue. At the same time, Coffey/Major acknowledge that integration can occur when there is alignment of the element of the management (legislation, policy, governance, investment and delivery) of a single issue.

All of the papers state explicitly or imply that holistic and systematic NRM focuses on action at the regional or landscape scale and thereby combines the advantages of a “big picture” or ecosystems approach and effective stakeholder engagement. A number of authors, including Park/Alexander, argue that integration must also involve activity at different geographic scales and they include a useful table that provides a rationale for operating across the regional, catchment, sub-catchment and property scales.

Abrahams and others argue that Australian and state government guidelines require that plans and investment strategies developed by regional bodies are holistic and systematic. Abrahams presents information that 30 regional plans and 28 investment strategies have been accredited as evidence that INRM is happening. Although there is little critical assessment of the regional delivery model, Abrahams and others acknowledge that the regional bodies have been given a “massive task”. Abrahams pays particular attention to what he sees as the critical issue of building and maintaining regional capacity in the face of issues that include burnout of participants and volunteers and the bureaucratisation of processes.

Whole of government

Both Abrahams and Coffey/Major are of the view that integration must include whole of government approaches to NRM, whether that be within or between departments, or across jurisdictions. Abrahams refers to the benefits he has observed from integration as a result of:

1. combining staff from the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) working to implement NHT and NAP;
2. devolving program administration to the Joint State Australian Government Steering Committees; and
3. efforts to build partnerships between the Australian and state government and regional communities through the regional bodies.

Abrahams is a little concerned that jurisdictions will adopt different delivery mechanisms that will inhibit efforts to integrate at a national scale, including through monitoring and evaluation. He also acknowledges that there has been an uneven response to efforts to engage local government, especially in jurisdictions that have been less specific in establishing formal rules for representation of stakeholders.

Coffey/Major emphasise the importance of developing a state-wide framework that provides for a coherent set of priorities and activities across a department's programs. These authors highlight the limitations identified from a recent review examining the extent that existing legislation, policy, planning and programs in Victoria were aligned. Some specific conclusions were that:

1. There is no state-wide framework;
2. There are no state-wide goals and targets for delivering INRM;
3. The relationship between on-ground work and state-wide priorities is unclear;
4. Links between regional land use planning and NRM are poorly established; and
5. Monitoring and review is not systematically undertaken.

Drawing on this work, Coffey/Major propose seven elements for an integrated state-wide framework that would provide a coherent process for setting priorities and allocating resources, including:

1. A state-wide vision for INRM;
2. Identifying INRM outcome areas, and approaches to target setting;
3. Enhancing legislative frameworks (eg. updating and streamlining legislation; enhancing under-utilised tools);
4. Aligning policy with outcomes (align program logics; improve mix of tools);
5. Identifying and investing in priorities (align with outcomes; align programs; longer-time frames; invest in tools for priority setting);
6. Improving knowledge and capacity (generate and manage integrated data); and

7. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

They also acknowledge that integration should not be seen as a panacea; that integration should not stifle diversity; that integration across program areas is challenging, takes time, and needs to build on existing frameworks and practices.

Engage the range of stakeholders and different knowledge systems

There is much discussion in the papers of the need to integrate the actions of resource managers in a catchment; embrace the range of stakeholder values (production, amenity, biodiversity, cultural heritage); draw upon different knowledges (local, scientific, indigenous, strategic/organisational, holistic); and accommodate the different stakeholder motivations, circumstances and learning styles when developing effective projects or policy options.

Park/Alexander believe they have developed an effective approach to the integration of salinity and biodiversity management. Research by SKM suggests that in the North Central region approximately 40,000 ha of threatened ecological communities, 26 endangered flora species and 23 endangered fauna species is at risk from salinity. Their approach, termed Biodiversity Action Planning (BAP) involves a three-tiered process that includes:

1. Strategic Overview: government priorities and available scientific knowledge establish the framework and methodology to use in identifying biodiversity assets requiring protection from salinity;
2. Landscape Plans: provide specific information about assets, priorities and options for action; and
3. Local Action Plans (LAP): regional staff establish partnerships with community groups and landholders to plan and implement work. LAP processes (bird surveys, habitat assessments, field days and workshops) employ GIS-based technologies and other tools to combine scientific and local knowledge at a range of scales and allow landholders to visualise and value biodiversity assets and make informed decisions about protecting those assets.

Park/Alexander emphasise the importance of building long-term relationships or partnerships, the need to adequately resource partnership building efforts, and the critical contribution that is made by staff that are skilled in GIS and competent in community engagement. They also highlight that there is still a gap in the ability of existing tools and methodologies to predict salinity outcomes from action at the local scale.

Abrahams reports that the engagement of Indigenous groups is uneven/patchy and attributes this track record to factors that include the variable capacity of regional groups to engage effectively and the higher priority of other issues for many Indigenous groups.

Systematic use of the range of policy choices

O’Kane and Phillips et al believe that INRM involves the integration of farm enterprise activities that are focussed on the production of food and fibre and ecosystem services within a regional planning framework. Phillips et al argue that it should be possible to combine the range of available and emerging voluntary, regulatory, educational and market-based instruments to achieve the outcomes desired. A fundamental element Victoria’s Rural Land Stewardship program that they describe is the development of investment support and instruments that will enable the public to purchase currently non-marketable public goods provided by rural landscapes that are beyond what it is reasonable to expect under a defined duty of care. They contrast their proposal for the strategic purchase of specific environmental outputs with the non-strategic approach in the past of funding activity to repair degradation. Phillips et al employ the concept of thresholds to emphasise the need to identify the level of activity required to effect change in resource condition, suggesting that investment should not occur if reaching the threshold identified is problematic. These authors highlight the importance of defining a reasonable duty of care and the need for improved governance rather than government.

O’Kane draws on his 20 years of NRM experience to illustrate the history of fads or fashions in the application of policy options and emphasises the need for regional organisations to manage their investment across planning, investigation, community capacity building and implementation over time. He includes a useful chart summarising how levels of investment in these activities have changed over time in his region.

O’Kane’s reflection on the history of efforts to manage 10,000 ha on the floodplain of the lower Goulburn as it reaches the Murray provides some insightful lessons about the importance of good science, sound program management and the opportunity for innovative policies. In the past the response to periodic flooding in this area was the construction of levees on either side of the river. These levees have negative environmental impacts and are regularly breached by larger floods and this leads to economic hardship for landowners. Recent analyses, without including the value of environmental services, demonstrate that the sensible approach is the compulsory acquisition of a small number of properties, the removal of levees and compensation of affected landholders. The problem is convincing government to invest.

O’Kane also suggests that the trend for substantial areas of land near major population centres to be managed for lifestyle/recreation values means that there is an opportunity to strengthen the mix of policy options through stronger planning regulations on rural subdivisions. Again, there is a consistent view between O’Kane, Coffey/Major and Abrahams about the importance of a whole of government approach that includes local government.

CONCLUSIONS

The practitioners share a common view of integrated NRM as being about a holistic and systematic approach to the management of the impacts of people on natural resources. They also agree that holistic and systematic approaches to NRM in Australia require action at the regional or landscape scale. The Victorians were strongly of the view that an assets-based rather than issues-based approach to regional planning increased the likelihood that an ecosystem approach would be adopted. At the same time, there was widespread agreement that effective integration required whole of government approaches and the development of coherent frameworks for the allocation of priorities and investments across programs and regions. There was also commitment to the development of stronger, more coherent package of policy options, including work to define a landholder's duty of care and use public funds to purchase environmental goods and services provided beyond a reasonable duty of care. As O'Kane points out, the difficulty is getting government to invest.

Examples were provided of effective integration at the program and project scale, including efforts that embraced new technologies to allow for the integration of different data and knowledge types. The Victorians suggest they have been engaged in a sophisticated dialogue about the nature of integrated catchment management. Overall, there was a sense of optimism that we have learned from experience and are actively seeking to identify ways of enhancing integration across jurisdictions. At the same time, it was understood that much more needed to be attempted; that integration is difficult and requires perseverance; that we need to be wary of embracing fads or fashions and ignoring essential elements of integration, including the need for good science, face-to-face contact and investment in enhancing capacity for integration.