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DEVELOPMENT OF A SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR ABORIGINAL MANAGED LANDS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

This planning process implemented by Aboriginal landholding organisations in 1999 has promoted Aboriginal interests in the rangelands by providing information about Aboriginal land management priorities and concerns and helping to build partnerships between Aboriginal groups, government and other agencies.

INTRODUCTION

The Strategy for Aboriginal Managed Lands in South Australia (SAMLISA) is a Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funded planning project undertaken in 1999 by South Australian Aboriginal organisations under the leadership of the SA Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT). It was initiated because of the need for a documented strategy to guide decisions on the allocation of NHT funding to the western third of SA which comprises, for NHT purposes the 'Aboriginal lands region'. A much broader goal was to promote more effective networks and linkages between 'mainstream' land management support services funded by State and Commonwealth governments and Aboriginal landholding groups. However at heart the project had unassuming aims. It sought to document and make accessible summary information relevant to the management of Aboriginal owned freehold and leasehold lands in South Australia with the expectation that this would in itself influence how these lands are valued and taken into account in other planning and management processes.

The project has already had considerable informal recognition as a model for action to address the marginalisation of Aboriginal interests in 'mainstream' land management policy and planning processes. In this paper I describe the context of the SAMLISA project, on which I was engaged as a consultant, its outcomes and the significance of this kind of planning process for people in rangelands³.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND RANGELANDS PLANNING

Aboriginal people have diverse and multiple interests in contemporary Australian rangelands:

- as common law native title holders and registered claimants - seeking to achieve recognition of their customary rights to land and natural resources in co-existence with other valid tenures.
- as heritage custodians - with specific cultural perspectives on the meaning of the land and the interrelationships between people and place.
- as communities - representing significant and very youthful sectors of local populations in many rangeland regions, and contributing markedly to local economies through community service sectors - a contribution which is largely unrecognised.
- as landowners, approximately 20% of the rangelands being now in freehold or leasehold Aboriginal ownership.

³ Copies of the Strategy for Aboriginal Managed Lands in South Australia final report (Feb 2000) are available from:

SA Aboriginal Lands Trust; PO Box 670; Marlestone SA 5033
Ph 08 8226 4439; Fax 08 8226 4493; email: altsa@webmedia.com.au

Aboriginal people's interests, management institutions, concerns and priorities do not fit dominant models. This means they struggle to achieve equity in access to services and opportunity. Indeed, defining what equity means is in itself problematic as there are often such marked differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal patterns of residence and economy, and associated service needs.

Because their management institutions do not fit dominant models, Aboriginal people throughout the rangelands struggle to have their interests recognised effectively in regional, local and sectoral planning processes. Such processes invariably discriminate against Aboriginal people, if not directly, then in subtle and indirect ways because their terms of reference, structures and mechanisms for community input derive from non-Aboriginal cultures and resource management concerns.

This situation has a dual impact - a lack of accounting for Aboriginal rights and interests in land and resource use decision making and a lack of reliable information available to decision makers about the nature of Aboriginal interests and concerns. These are impacts that the SAMLISA project was directed to addressing in relation to management of the 20% of South Australia that is Aboriginal owned freehold and leasehold land.

THE NHT AND ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES

The SAMLISA project was facilitated by unique arrangements in place in SA to accommodate the perspectives of Aboriginal people in NHT decision making. To some extent the NHT has taken Aboriginal cultural perspectives on land management into account in its national guidelines, for example by regarding "indigenous traditional land management practices", which often involve care of specific culturally significant places, as priority actions. However assessment panels which make recommendations on NHT funding decisions rarely have an adequate understanding of this accommodation since they are dominated by people from Anglo-Australian cultures and lack information on Aboriginal perspectives and priorities.

The SAMLISA planning process is one of a number of specific mechanisms included in the 1997 NHT Partnership Agreement between the South Australian and Commonwealth governments that are designed to promote the interests and cultural perspectives of Aboriginal people in the implementation of the NHT. Other key mechanisms include an Aboriginal Regional Assessment Panel (RAP) which has a majority membership of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal organisation representatives and which reviews all applications for NHT funding which have an identifiable Aboriginal interest. As a result of such mechanisms SA has had, throughout the life of the NHT, by far the strongest record of any Australian state/territory in the attainment of Aboriginal equity in access to funds and other support for sustainable resource management.

THE SAMLISA PROCESS

The SAMLISA planning process extended over a year and applied to some 110 properties under diverse tenure and management arrangements and covering more than 20% of South Australia. It involved:

- a Steering committee of Aboriginal landholder, PIRSA and Indigenous Land Corporation representatives overseeing the process and its outputs.
- two workshops, one of Aboriginal landholder representatives and one also involving government agency representatives.
- interview based data collection from Aboriginal landholder representatives on a property by property basis and preparation of consistent, summary data for public release about land use, goals, heritage values, environmental management issues and actions, and landholder management capacity for each property.
- review of planning instruments, strategies and reports applicable to Aboriginal freehold and leasehold lands.

- canvassing of a vast array of issues with government, Aboriginal organisation staff and Aboriginal community members.
- collaborative arrangements between planning teams at the University of Adelaide and the SA Aboriginal Lands Trust to complete the workload associated with the process.
- launch of the final report by the SA Deputy Premier and Minister for Primary Industries.

An important consideration in implementation of this process was the need to avoid impacting on the rights and responsibilities of individual groups of Aboriginal landholders in relation to self determination on their lands. Even though the project was directed and managed by Aboriginal organisations, not one of those involved has any mandate to speak for every parcel of land involved, let alone to determine its future management. The cooperative involvement of the range of Aboriginal landholder groups would only be assured while this situation was respected.

FINDINGS, OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS

Targeted NHT funding

The most tangible outcome for Aboriginal landholders has been the establishment of a devolved grant process, funded by NHT and ILC and managed through the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) and the SAMLISA Steering Committee, which is directed to addressing the priorities that the SAMLISA process documented for management of these lands.

Data

Another significant output is the information base summarised in the final report which enables generalisations about Aboriginal land use and management in SA to be based on actual data, for the first time. This establishes:

- protection of cultural values of the land is the most important motivation for management, with maintenance and restoration of the natural environment and promotion of economic and social self reliance also very important goals for landholders.
- most properties are used for Aboriginal community purposes including residential, recreation and cultural uses.
- about half of the properties are also used for public purposes including educational and conservation activities.
- half the properties are used for commercial uses including agriculture, pastoralism and tourism. However these are minor uses on many of these properties. Lack of commercial viability limits the capacity of landholders to make investments in restoring past degradation on their lands and promoting future sustainable management.
- Aboriginal landholders in the rangelands are most interested in increased use of their lands for tourism, and also for Aboriginal community land uses and general public use (including conservation).
- all properties face a number of environmental management issues which impact on current and future land uses, notably weeds, feral animals, impacts from previous and adjacent land uses, and soil erosion. Most landholders have been taking action to address these issues.
- management capacity of the landholder groups is very varied and is least well developed in the areas of planning and political efficacy; scientific approaches to environmental management; and business management. A third or more groups report significant deficiencies in vehicles, equipment and infrastructure, external networks and property management planning. Most of the workforce for land management activities is organised through community based part time employment (CDEP) schemes.

Strategic directions

The strategic directions put forward in the SAMLISA report comprise a series of modest recommendations for implementation by government, public sector agencies, statutory bodies and Aboriginal landholders themselves. Most of them derive from very long standing concerns of Aboriginal landholders and many support and reinforce actions that are to some degree already underway. Their value derives not from their novelty but because they document, communicate and reinforce, in an appropriate context, some of the very persistent efforts and aspirations of Aboriginal landholders and their collaborators.

Information needs

Everyone involved in the SAMLISA process was hungry for information. Aboriginal landholders said above all they want information about where they can go for advice and tangible assistance to address land management issues and promote economic development opportunities on their lands. As a result, collating such information became a concern of the SAMLISA project and part of the final project report.

Government people's information needs proved less tangible. In general they want to promote their priorities and concerns amongst Aboriginal landholders. The information on Aboriginal managed lands in the SAMLISA report provides a starting point for better targeting and marketing of government priorities and support mechanisms for sustainable resource management to Aboriginal landholders. This is critical if contemporary Aboriginal land management practice is to promote sustainability.

Recognition and empowerment

Aboriginal people and staff of Aboriginal organisations who were involved in the SAMLISA process, and those who have observed it or seen its outputs from a distance, are taking significant pride in the very existence of a planning report that is about Aboriginal managed land. The extent of their excitement is surprising unless you reflect on the prevalence of reports and planning processes which deal with Aboriginal land interests as a marginal concern, if at all. Aboriginal people are excited because this planning process and report concerns the land they manage and was conceived and directed by their people.

Cooperation and partnerships

Everybody involved in the process expressed a need for closer cooperation and better recognition of Aboriginal people as key stakeholders in sustainable resource management in SA. The planning process confirmed the extent to which Aboriginal views and perspectives, rights and interests have been marginalised and ignored in natural resource management planning. It also became apparent during the SAMLISA process that that this situation is changing and that there is a growing commitment from all parties to overcome the barriers that have inhibited effective cross cultural interface in land related decisions in the past. Implementation of the strategic directions in the SAMLISA report will certainly advance this.

Integrating Aboriginal concerns into regional planning

Aboriginal people are stakeholders in planning decisions on all lands in SA because of cultural heritage and native title rights and interests. However the SAMLISA process focused only on management of Aboriginal freehold and leasehold land. It did not aim to develop workable mechanisms to promote more effective involvement of Aboriginal people in the whole array of land use and management decision making. It is clear that addressing this broader challenge will require much lateral thinking and concerted action - far beyond the appointment of Aboriginal representatives on existing Boards and committees which is the usual response to questions of Aboriginal

involvement. Rather government and associated bodies will need to transform 'terra nullius' institutions for land decision making - those structures and institutions which were established prior to the recognition of native title. It is also certain that this transformation will be pursued most effectively at regional, rather than statewide, levels. This is because the regional scale is the critical scale for understanding the complex geographies and politics of Aboriginal interests in land and in heritage protection. In SA the invitation extended by the Attorney General to Aboriginal native title claimants to pursue the resolution of native title claims through negotiated agreements may provide a mechanism for effecting such a transformation.