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The Australian Rangeland Society

PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMIES OF THE LAKE EYRE BASIN

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, approaches to natural resource management have evolved towards greater recognition of the importance of involving communities in decisions which affect their areas of interest. Throughout Australia a number of “interface organisations” have been established to facilitate dialogue between governments, industries and communities for sustainable natural resource outcomes. Several such “interface organisations” exist in the Lake Eyre Basin, however, little is known about the success factors of their engagement approaches. A method has been developed to assess these success factors in the Lake Eyre Basin, which includes: (i) development of regional social, economic and resource profiles; (ii) a toolkit of engagement success factors of NRM organisations; (iii) case studies of organisational interventions; and (iv) development of on-going engagement monitoring systems. Research on the regional social, economic and resource profiles is near completion.

INTRODUCTION

In the semi-arid and arid landscape of the Lake Eyre Basin, the natural wetting and drying cycles and especially the flows in the river systems drive the production that supports ecosystems and human wellbeing in the Basin. Human activities can impact on those flow patterns causing changes to ecosystem resources and human lifestyles. This study is part of a community-driven process that was brought into focus in the mid 1990’s in response to development and management proposals that appeared to threaten natural water regimes and established lifestyles in the Basin. Community concerns generated support from State and Australian governments to address the issues of concern.

By 2000, State and Australian Government Ministers in jurisdictions with legislative responsibility for the resources of the Basin had signed an agreement to work cooperatively to ensure the sustainable use and health of the rivers and associated resources. Part of the agreement was to monitor and report on the health of the rivers and associated resources. The community, through the Advisory Committee, insisted that successful management of the resources would only be achieved if information about the activities of the people who rely on and interact with the resources are monitored along with the state of the rivers. This study is designed to gather information about the people of the Basin, how they interact with the natural resources and each other, and how they make decisions concerning natural resource management. One outcome of the project will be to develop monitoring protocols that can be used along side monitoring the State of the rivers.

This paper will show (i) a brief history of, and context for, the study and provide some of the early outputs from the work; (ii) information about the relationship between ecosystem services and the distribution of people in relation to the varying landscape across the Basin; and (iii) the direction and method for the remainder of the study.

METHOD

The project consists of four components: (i) regional social, economic and resource profiles; (ii) a toolkit of engagement success factors of NRM organisations; (iii) case studies of organisational interventions; and (iv) monitoring systems.

Component 1: Regional social, economic and resource profiles will be developed using secondary data sources (eg. ABS) to geographically display and overlay the socio-economic and ecosystem service characteristics of the Lake Eyre Basin. A conceptual network analysis of engagement within and between sectors (eg. mining) will also be developed through content analysis of organisational documents, combined with semi-structured interviews with key informants.

Component 2: A toolkit of success factors of NRM organisations will be developed through interviews with communities and organisations within the Lake Eyre Basin. The interviews will be conducted using a snow-ball approach and involve community researchers (selected with the assistance of the project steering committee) who have established trust with those communities/sectors targeted for interview. Interviews will be transcribed and analysed with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software packages N-Vivo and Leximancer.

Component 3: Case studies of organisational interventions will be conducted in partnership with NRM organisations who see benefit in transferring success factors identified in component 2 of the project. The case studies will be conducted using an action research approach. Two to four NRM organisations will be included in the case studies, depending on the intervention/s to be trialled. The project steering committee will aid the facilitation of dialogue with potential NRM organisations for the case studies.

Component 4: Monitoring systems will be developed based on the findings of component 2 and embedded as part of the case studies (component 3) to trial the validity and practicality of those systems.

CURRENT RESEARCH

The regional social, economic and resource profiles; as well as, the network analysis of engagement, are due to be completed by the 1st July 2006. Apart from being resources for the communities of the Lake Eyre Basin, these outputs will provide the context for the analysis of engagement effectiveness and design of monitoring systems.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Research on the toolkit of success factors of NRM organisations will begin from July 2006 and run over a 12-month period. Case studies of organisational interventions and the development and implement of monitoring systems will then begin from July 2007. The project is due to be completed by July 2008.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The project aims to improve the engagement processes of interface organisations in the Lake Eyre Basin. The improvement in engagement processes will help to understand and address issues of power and vulnerability in the Basin; as well as, the sustainable use of natural resources. Another expected outcome is the implementation of monitoring systems to allow on-going improvement to NRM engagement processes in the Basin.

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