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ALLIANCES IN THE RANGELANDS – LEB & OTHER EXAMPLES: A GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE LAKE EYRE BASIN STORY

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INTRODUCTION

If the rangelands are the forgotten backyard of each state, it is often government which has the poorest memory. In the eastern states of Australia the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) overlaps much of that backyard in three states and the Northern Territory. It is a long way between voters in the outback, and generally burning issues are few when compared with the hiatus over education/health/policing that grip most of our legislatures. The Lake Eyre Basin may be the largest catchment in Queensland and comprise a large part of South Australia but when compared to the natural resource management issues of the Wet Tropics, Great Barrier Reef or the Murray Darling it has never been high on the radar. After all, only 15,000 of our 4 million odd Queenslanders live there and even fewer South Australians. Only in the Northern Territory is there a significant population centre in Alice Springs.

EVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE LEB

The government spend in the management of the natural resources of the basin was for many years equally sparse. There were a few hardy stock inspectors, experimentalists and a handful of park rangers. Cross-border exchanges between government departments were limited to the odd meeting between the self same officers in places like Birdsville.

This changed in the 1990s. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) asked for a World Heritage assessment of the Lake Eyre Basin wetlands. The outback that always was out there but never visited was discovered by our four-wheel drive owning urban inhabitants. The Keating Government went to the 1993 polls with an intention to declare the South Australian portion of the basin for World Heritage listing. This galvanised the community of the region in both South Australia and Queensland to realise that no longer could they conduct their business of raising sheep and cattle without attracting interest from the broader community and governments.

World Heritage listing at a government level had a rather sorry history of state versus Commonwealth arguments, often in very public arenas as high as the United Nations. Fresh from arguments over World Heritage listing of Kakadu and the Wet Tropics, the Commonwealth was understandably cautious in proceeding with the World Heritage listing of any site unless it had the support of the State or Territory.

Meanwhile back in the basin the community was getting organised. The pastoralists of the Far North of South Australia and the Channel Country of Queensland formed the Lake Eyre Basin Catchment Management Group. This in turn led to the Lake Eyre Basin Steering Group - which was charged with coming up with a model for community-based management of the natural resources of the Lake Eyre Basin. Government saw the formation of the steering group as an opportunity to be involved in the process and things looked like settling down to steady progress. This was the first example of cross-border cooperation of the government level in the broader management of the basin's natural resources.

The next big event was the purchase of land near Windorah in 1995 by a consortium of cotton growers who saw an opportunity to irrigate from the Cooper Creek. Their application for water licences led to a flurry of government activity on both sides of the border. Water planning, which hitherto had been more of a coastal activity in Queensland, came to the Channel Country. The Department of Natural Resources created a West Region and regular exchanges of information began between officers of the States and Commonwealth.

Our politicians stepped in realising the strength of passion in the community and made decisions. Federal Environment Minister Robert Hill in early 1998 announced that the Commonwealth government would not proceed with World Heritage listing, preferring to back community-based efforts to manage the resources of the basin. He also announced the signing of the Heads of Agreement for the Lake Eyre Basin which provided intent to develop an agreement over the management of the natural resources of the Lake Eyre Basin in turn supported by complementary State and Federal legislation.

Meanwhile the community process had moved on with the Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group commencing business in 1998. The coordinating group was funded by the Commonwealth through NHT1, supported by funds from the South Australian and Queensland governments.

In Queensland the Water Management Planning process, commenced back in late 1996, resulted in significant public debate on the wisdom of allocating water from a highly variable arid river system like the Cooper. With the strength of public opinion being strongly against irrigation, in 1999 the Minister for Natural Resources, Rod Welford, announced a revised Draft Water Management Plan that did not allow the taking of any further water for irrigation in the catchment.

In late 2000 the Lake Eyre Basin Agreement was signed by ministers from the Commonwealth, South Australia and Queensland governments. Federal and state legislation was passed and in early 2001 the first meetings of the Lake Eyre Basin Ministerial Forum and the Community Advisory Committee and Scientific Advisory Panel were held.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

The next challenge to government came as the first round of the Natural Heritage Trust was coming to an end. Governments were concerned that investments made under NHT1 did not always attack key strategic issues required to change the condition and management of our natural resources. The new approach proposed was funding natural resource management bodies, led by community boards, who were charged with developing regional plans and investment strategies. Although broadly similar, each state came up with a slightly different approach to this. It was clear that a cross-border organisation like the Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group would not fit easily into this new approach. Although natural resource management bodies around Australia are often modelled on catchments or bioregions, there is one thing in common - they all stop at a state borders. Neither Queensland nor South Australia governments supported a body that crossed the state line. The result is that the natural resources of the Lake Eyre Basin are managed by four boards.

The community has not always been happy with such approaches. Government needs to balance its needs for policy and legislation, value for the taxpayer dollar whilst keeping the goodwill of the community on board. This can be a difficult beast to ride. Governments quite rightly can be criticised for being inflexible and slow to produce results. The regional nrm body process on the other hand can deliver flexibility and timeliness the government can only dream about.

CONCLUSIONS

Where do we go from here? The Lake Eyre Basin Ministerial Forum appears to be working well. Government processes need to be tuned to reality and move at a faster pace but the partnership between government, regional groups, academia and the broader community is strengthening. It is a learning process based on mutual respect and give-and-take.

Where has all of this taken me? I consider myself to be a lucky individual who has had the benefit of working throughout the basin. This has allowed me to develop knowledge and contacts which have stood me in good stead. Some of this would have happened anyhow, but many things simply would not have happened without the goodwill of the Lake Eyre Basin process. Working with both Desert Channels QLD and SA Rangelands INRM Group in the production of complementary NRM plans has been a great experience. We now have plans which share a common vision and cross-border actions to manage the natural resources of the basin in a more strategic way.

Can we build on this success and take this a bit further? Given that there are around a dozen rangelands NRM groups in Australia there is real potential for a Rangelands Alliance. Steve Wilson from Desert Channels can tell us more.