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## TOOLS FOR SUCCESSFUL NRM ENGAGEMENT IN THE LAKE EYRE BASIN

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### ABSTRACT

Achieving successful NRM in Outback Australia depends upon effective social engagement processes which are adapted to suit remote regions. In line with the notion of ‘desert syndrome’ remote regions tend to be characterised by sparse populations with distant voices. In this context we present a suite of key factors, tools and principles for successful community engagement processes relating to remote areas. We begin by drawing out key themes from literature on successful community engagement in NRM, followed by a case study to identify ‘success factors’ of the engagement processes in the Lake Eyre Basin. The case study presents findings from a series of interviews conducted with the government liaison officers responsible for facilitating regional NRM; and community interviews conducted between residents of the case study region. The results draw attention to general principles such as building trust, working in partnership; supporting community champions; and maintaining transparency. In addition, characteristics relating specifically to arid areas relate to timeframes, such as developing long term relationships and committing to long term NRM outcomes; as well as being able to take advantage of (potentially infrequent) opportunities in the operating environment when they do occur. In conclusion, it is apparent that successful NRM engagement for remote areas requires a multitude of seemingly contrasting characteristics: to be independent yet maintain effective partnerships; to be the voice of the community whilst being in alignment with government priorities; and to be determined yet adaptive, creatively operating within resource and capacity constraints. This research was developed as part of the People, Communities and Economies of the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) project, funded through the Natural Heritage Trust with the support of the Desert Knowledge CRC.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper presents key factors for successful NRM engagement in the Lake Eyre Basin (see Measham *et al* 2007 for an expanded discussion). It compares literature review findings with the results of community and government interviews to suggest that unique desert environments call for similarly unique approaches to engagement. The research, which is part of the People, Communities and Economies of the Lake Eyre Basin project has focused on the role of interface organisations – a term used to describe organisations (such as Catchment Committees or Regional NRM Bodies) which serve as linkages, or translators, between local communities and broader state and Commonwealth governments. The research presented in this paper builds on earlier work developing a socio-economic profile of the region (see Herr *et al.* 2007) and comparing the different regional arrangements across states (see Larson 2007).

The Lake Eyre Basin spans areas of South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory. At approximately 1.2 million square kilometres, it covers around one-sixth of the Australian landmass and is among the world’s largest internally draining river systems. An arid and remote region, it has very low population density, rarely reaching more than one person per km<sup>2</sup> (Herr *et al.* 2007) and is home to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The mix of economic activities includes mining, pastoralism and tourism.

In examining the attributes of the Basin, we see key drivers defined by Stafford Smith (2008) as pertaining to the ‘desert syndrome.’ Compounding factors of: highly variable climate; scarce resources; sparse populations; isolation from decision makers and markets; unpredictability of markets, labour and policy; limited region-specific research contrasted against local and traditional

knowledge; and unique people, institutions and culture call for different approaches to engagement and NRM than might otherwise apply in other (non-desert) regions.

## **PRINCIPLES AND TOOLS FOR SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT**

The tendency of the literature has been to define engagement in terms of community. It is important to emphasise that successful engagement, as defined in this research, involves the architecture of the engagement environment as well as the interface dynamics. Such an approach necessitates the navigation of and involvement with *government* agencies and processes just as much as ability to harness and involve the agency and energy of resident *communities*.

### **Methodology**

An extensive literature review was conducted to synthesise existing information and approaches to engagement. In order to examine the nature and context of NRM engagement processes in remote areas, interviews were held with government representatives and residents of the Basin. A total of eight government interviews (with state and federal representatives) were carried out by experienced social scientists. To access existing networks of trust and local knowledge, a further 49 community interviews were conducted by community based researchers who were specially trained by the project team. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Results from the literature and key themes and perspectives raised by community and government interviews are summarised and discussed below.

### **Factors for successful engagement**

Key principles for successful engagement emerging from the literature included: community ownership (Lane *et al.* 2005b, Measham 2007); promotion of inclusiveness, equity and trust (Aslin and Brown 2004; Lane and McDonald 2005); inclusion of multiple interests (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000); a focus on strategic outcomes (Aslin and Brown 2004); transparency (Lucas *et al.* 2005); definition of appropriate scale (Lane *et al.* 2005a); sufficient resourcing and access to assistance (Aslin and Brown 2004; Nelson and Pettit 2004); and effective communication (Selman 2004).

Results from both the community and government interviews reinforced the importance of these principles. However it was evident that the social and geographic landscape of the Basin dictates that they play out differently and that additional factors are particularly important. The small, sparse population of the Basin was described as impacting heavily on how engagement can occur. Interviews highlighted that while it was difficult to engage face to face or have a visible presence at the local level (due to the time and costs involved), the increased likelihood of perceptions of isolation or exclusion made this even more important in remote areas. Community interviews also stressed the reliance on, and importance of, key individuals in the Basin. A major risk for these people was being over-burdened, engaged outside their capacity and interests and subsequently burning out. This was compounded by difficulties in attracting and retaining effective staff, which was highlighted in the government interviews. While it was recognised that continuity of staffing was important to successful engagement, there was equal recognition that short term and uncertain funding arrangements along with continuous changes in programs and institutional arrangements made it difficult to sustain community engagement as well as attract and maintain staff.

More positively, the small population with shared interests can make it easier to facilitate strong agreement and shared vision in a relatively shorter time. That is, while there are significant challenges for governments and NRM organisations to build strong relationships with dispersed populations, there is a possibility for engaging with a higher proportion of the community in a meaningful way (than, for example, a densely populated urban area). The impact of distance on decision making clearly had an impact on how NRM bodies were perceived and thus able to engage with their communities. Government interviews suggested there was a need for interface organisations to avoid being seen as an extension of government authority – and yet two of the interface organisations operate under government legislation<sup>1</sup> and all are beholden to government for funding and are required to work within a policy framework. Similarly, community interviews highlighted the tension between

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the responsibilities of regional bodies to act on the priorities of the region, but only as far as they align with government priorities.

Comparing across the different components of the research (literature review, government interviews and community interviews), four generic factors stand out for achieving successful engagement in a wide variety of contexts:

- developing trust,
- adequate resourcing,
- effective communication, and
- being inclusive.

To these we can add some factors which emerge from the review of community-engagement literature, which has shown the importance of:

- being strategic,
- promoting community ownership,
- defining the appropriate scale for interaction,

In terms of Basin specific success factors, we can incorporate four important success factors from a government perspective:

- being transparent,
- being *determined* to achieve NRM initiatives,
- *adapting* as required to reach outcomes, and
- aligning on-ground works with government priorities.

Finally, success factors from a community perspective focus on:

- being independent,
- respecting desert timeframes and the geography of the Lake Eyre Basin itself,
- getting on with the job, and
- avoiding burnout.

These factors represent a mix of desert specific and broader issues which apply in a wide range of contexts. Considering the notion of Desert Drivers, it would seem that even general factors play out differently in remote areas, due to the intensity of challenges where scale and low population density has the potential to exacerbate difficulties in effective NRM engagement (Stafford Smith 2008). It is clear that environmental management organisations in the Lake Eyre Basin need to balance a range of social and economic tensions relating to these different perspectives in order to achieve effective NRM.

## **CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR REMOTE DESERT AREAS OF AUSTRALIA**

This research has analysed some of the specific challenges facing desert interface organisations, as determined by their remoteness, sparse populations, variability and resourcing issues. Some of the barriers to successful engagement have the potential to be overcome given appropriate structures and processes supported by sufficient human resources, technical expertise and money. Maintaining credible staff and avoiding community burnout are major issues for NRM in general, and this research demonstrated acute reliance on particular individuals throughout the Basin who take on multiple roles. There is merit in asking how better resourcing or changing roles of such key individuals might alleviate burnout – or whether stress stems from structural factors such as a small population rather than the lack of resourcing or recognition of their work.

In considering the success factors presented in this research, it is clear that NRM engagement requires a multitude of seemingly contrasting characteristics: to be independent yet maintain effective partnerships, to be the voice of the community whilst being in alignment with government priorities; to be determined yet adaptive. This demonstrates that the very nature of interface organisations poses a challenge in terms of having multiple, and frequently competing aims and priorities. However, at

least it is clear that these challenges are recognised by community members and government officers alike, as was the importance of supporting successful engagement processes. This was reflected in the high degree to which the participants who took part in this research were keen to contribute towards and receive the outcome of the 'factors for successful engagement' presented in this study.

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