



**Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project:
a Planning and Learning Experience**



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Introduction

Australian rangelands are under pressure. Primary industries struggle to be viable, natural resources are in decline, there are conflicts over resource use, community services are in decline and there are significant changes in land tenure. A new approach to regional planning is needed if we are to manage these pressures.

To us, the term 'planning' means a process by which people (groups) develop an agreed vision, set objectives, determine strategies, and monitor and evaluate outcomes to arrive at change. In every region there are many individuals, groups, industries, sectors and agencies all undertaking planning at various scales. Each of these groups, and their planning activities, has an influence on the sustainability of a region. Piecemeal improvement of the planning they do can help, but for long-term sustainability, the whole system of planning must be improved. Doing so requires the long term collaboration of all groups within a region.

We consider that managing natural resources in rural regions needs a capable, integrated and informed community that can plan for the future and is supported by an enabling political framework.

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is one of a series published by Land & Water Australia about regional rangeland community planning processes. Others in the series include:

- *Rangeways: Community based Planning for Ecologically Sustainable Land Use in the North East Goldfields of Western Australia*
- *Regional Approaches to Rangeland Planning: Seeking Sustainability in the Western Division of New South Wales by Changing Laws, Policies and Administration.*

Each booklet describes the experiences and lessons learnt by researchers undertaking large regional planning projects. Each booklet has a similar structure so that readers can compare and contrast the projects.

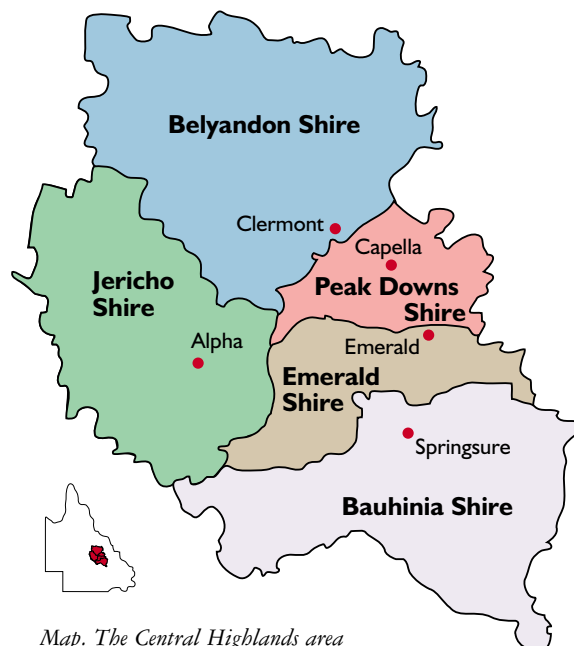
This booklet describes the experiences of the Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning

Project, also known as CHRRUPP. This pilot project experimented with more negotiated approaches to planning by working with stakeholder groups in the Central Highlands of Queensland. CHRRUPP aimed to help these groups to take control of their own regional future. Details about the project can be found in publications listed under *Further Reading* and are not included in this booklet. Instead we write about the lessons we learnt from the work in the hope it may provide you with a better understanding of regional planning and some practical insights and steps you can take in your region.

The Central Highlands regional economy is based on coal mining, pastoralism, irrigated agriculture and dryland cropping. Extensive tree clearing and debates about dam building are the focus of national attention. The region is subject to a range of overlapping native title claims and lacks a comprehensive representative reserve system. The diversity of these problems lent itself to regionally negotiated solutions.

The project was preceded by a one-year scoping study (see *Further Reading*) that investigated regional planning attempts across Australia and identified three cornerstones required for a healthy regional planning system:

- support for individuals and sectors to develop their own planning and management capacity
- facilitating better understanding of the social, economic and biophysical processes within regions
- stronger institutional arrangements that facilitate negotiation between these interests.



Map. The Central Highlands area

CHRRUPP

The Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project was an experiment studying regional planning process as well as a real-world planning exercise aimed at establishing a negotiated and integrated approach to planning in the Central Highlands of Queensland. During the three years of the research project, a CSIRO research team provided technical assistance, administrative support and project coordination as well as documenting, synthesising, and evaluating the findings.

As an ongoing approach to regional planning, the key elements of the planning system developed and the services and arrangements that support it have gradually been handed over to full community management. There have been many changes in the region as a result of CHRRUPP. The Project improved the region's system of planning, changed natural resource use and regional infrastructure, and developed a number of new tools and techniques for doing regional planning.

CHRRUPP involved individuals, groups, and industries from across the Central Highlands, and the broader Central Queensland region. We worked with all regional groups (we called them sectors) to help them understand natural resource problems within the region and to undertake their own planning for natural resources. We also helped these sectors to negotiate regional solutions to their shared problems with natural resource use and management (see Figure 1.). The sectors included: pastoral, grains, intensive food and fibre production, local government, State government, conservation, mining, human services, Landcare, Aboriginal, economic/tourism, university, and a broader Integrated Catchment Management Group (Fitzroy Basin Association).

A Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC) was formed as the main and integrating mechanism for the Project. The Committee brought together sector representatives and established a forum for interaction and collaboration. The forum developed a common regional vision and regional strategies. The RCC also provided a focus for support to be provided to the planning process through four overarching regional services we developed:

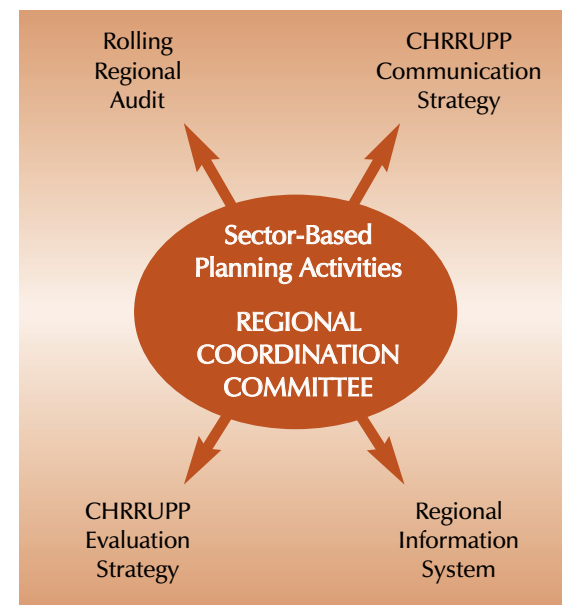
1. the Central Highlands regional information service and decision support tools
2. a system of state-of-region reporting (the Rolling Regional Audit)
3. a project communication strategy
4. ongoing evaluation.

See Figure 2. for relationship between RCC and support processes.

Figure 1. Sectoral planning process



Figure 2. Central Highland Regional Resource Use Planning



Key lessons

The key lessons we drew from three years experience were that:

- Strategic, long term investment in all three cornerstones of the planning system is fundamental to achieve structural change in a region. The three cornerstones are: support for individuals and sectors to develop their own planning and management capacity; facilitating better understanding of the social, economic and biophysical processes in regions; and stronger institutional arrangements that facilitate negotiation between these interests. All three cornerstones require constant and equal attention.
- Without a cohesive, long term approach for supporting the planning system improvements may still occur but will take longer, may be cyclical, and will likely not be equitable between sectors.
- Long term, planning systems approaches are likely to cost less for all levels of government than the current *ad hoc* and silo-based approach to regional planning.

The current approach to planning and delivery of government services in many regions can no longer be justified in terms of cost, efficiency, equity and sustainability. There is no financial impediment to adopting a planning system approach: the critical barriers result from resistance by our institutions.

LAYING SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS

One of the cornerstones of healthy regional planning for sustainable resource use is to support individuals, groups and sectors in regions to develop their own planning and management capacity. To lay a strong social foundation for regional planning it is critical to involve all the interests within a region. You must identify and engage the sectors, build the capacity of individuals, and help individuals and groups to establish links and partnerships. Strong sectors are critical for sustainable regions because it is at this level that regional coordination, activity and negotiation can occur in a manageable way. There are also individuals who contribute so substantially to the planning in a region that they too are fundamental to success and sustainability.

IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING SECTORS

As a first step it was important to scope and engage the different sectors represented in the Central Highlands. We identified individuals, small groups and larger institutions with a clear stake in the future of the region. Then we established the critical issues for each sector, as well as their strengths and limitations.

We found it essential that sectors present themselves and define their boundaries, mode of operation and priority issues. Some sectors were formal, with unambiguous membership (e.g. the local government sector, which includes the five shire councils). Other sectors were semi-formal, where not all interested individuals are covered by groups.





There were also informal sectors comprising a loose alliance of individuals and groups with an interest, for example the conservation sector, which includes all those interested in biodiversity.

The RCC provided a forum to explore critical issues with groups in each sector and to facilitate interaction across sectors. The committee included representatives from each sector and met three times a year. Representatives were encouraged to liaise with their own sector and bring to the committee a grassroots perspective on resource use planning issues and opportunities in the Central Highlands. We learnt many lessons from the work of the committee. One of the ongoing challenges was to ensure that the sector representative had a clear mandate from their constituency. Another challenge was to ensure continuity and progress on issues between meetings. To do this we found it useful to include a proxy from each sector and hold tele-linked meetings in between the larger face-to-face forums.

INVOLVING THE BROADER COMMUNITY

It is important to try to involve the broader community (even though this can be difficult) if a regional planning process is to be genuinely representative. There are a range of reasons why people don't become involved in regional planning process, including economic barriers, gender and racial issues, political and educational differences, functional barriers through age and disability, and physical barriers such as remoteness and isolation. However, people often have little interest, and don't see the relevance of planning to their lives or don't see how they can have a genuine influence.

We developed a detailed communication plan to limit barriers to involvement and create interest in the broader community. This plan was reviewed midway through the project. In keeping with the plan we developed a project brand (the CHRRUPP gecko logo), a variety of communication products (a newsletter, contributions to other organisations' newsletters, fact sheets and media coverage), and 'Regional Priorities' forums held in different locations. An important lesson for us was to recognise when communication and involvement strategies were not working and move to more effective ones. The evaluation process helped us to recognise which strategies worked and those that didn't. For example, the 'Regional Priorities' forums were initially pitched at a general level. However, we found that they attracted more community interest when pitched at specific issues, and these types of forums also met our needs.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Many or even all sectors in a region may share common or compatible objectives. It is important to identify these shared objectives as they can provide opportunities for partnerships. Effective partnerships are important for maintaining interaction between sectors, though they can be slow to evolve. Partnerships are fundamental to regional sustainability because the sectors are often stronger together than they are alone.

Successful strategies for building partnerships were enhanced by the following:

- involving credible local champions who were able to identify and grasp opportunities
- helping sectors to work together on one or two significant regional issues of mutual concern (e.g. this led to a partnership between BHP Coal and the World Wide Fund for Nature for a large bluegrass conservation project)
- promoting opportunities for partnerships within and beyond the region by frequent targeted presentations to government agencies and research institutions at regional, State and national levels (e.g. this produced a long term partnership between Central Queensland University, the Desert Uplands Region and the pastoral sector to explore carbon trading issues)
- providing technical and facilitation support to groups who showed interest in establishing partnerships.

Creating a learning environment

A second cornerstone of healthy planning is to build sound technical understanding of the biophysical, social, institutional, and economic functioning of the region. Information and technology should support and inform participative learning processes. A community that is engaged and informed is more willing to participate, negotiate and accept the outcomes of the planning process than one that isn't.

INVESTING IN SECTORS

Participative learning processes require investment in sectors and individuals. In our experience, facilitating interaction across sectors helped broaden the perspectives of most groups in them and allowed each sector to better understand other's concerns and issues. It also fostered respect for others and an increased willingness to listen to others' views.

We found it important to:

- allow sectors to be self defining and so dictate their own boundaries, mode of operation and priority issues
- involve State agencies as a sector in their own right – this may help the State move towards more whole-of-government responses to critical issues
- not assume that any sector, e.g. State agencies, does not need capacity-building
- allow sectors to develop at a pace that suits their constituents
- use approaches to sector development that are culturally appropriate
- ensure investment in sector development occurs equitably across sectors.



INVESTING IN INDIVIDUALS

Helping individuals build their capacity to learn is just as important as helping sectors. Individual contributions are often critical in building a sustainable region, although the notion of facilitating these contributions is rarely included in approaches to regional planning. It is important to build the capacity of individuals in leadership, technical knowledge, willingness to participate in negotiation, and effective work practices. In turn, individuals are then better able to facilitate consensus and rotate work effort rather than over-commit themselves or others.

Successful strategies we used to build individual capacity included:

- providing access to leadership training
- keeping opportunities open for people sceptical of the process
- sponsoring individuals for external scholarships and awards
- assisting with education about sustainable development
- facilitating access to mentors with formal education qualifications
- building opportunities for youth
- providing access to information and networks that linked individuals to available opportunities either strategically or as they occurred
- promoting the presence of individuals in the community.

While we did not have a written or formal plan to build individual capacity in this project, we would include this step next time. Such a plan needs to be flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGIES THAT INFORM LEARNING

Part of building a technically sound understanding of regional planning is improving the community's access to, and awareness of, the role of technical information. We devoted much effort to developing tools and technologies to inform the planning process, in particular a state-of-region reporting system, a regional information system and decision support software.

Stakeholders need to understand how their region functions socially, economically, environmentally and politically if they are to make decisions about natural resources. To aid decision-making, we established a state-of-region reporting system called the Central Highlands Rolling Regional Audit (RRA). This provides useful, accessible information and enables regional progress on a range of themes and the effectiveness of current responses to be monitored.

The RRA is organised as a series of Indicator Reporting pages on specific topics relevant to regional sustainability in the Central Highlands. In total, 29 indicator reporting pages have been prepared covering the following topics:

- socio-economic characteristics
- resource use and management
- sector development
- community development
- institutional arrangements.

For this kind of reporting system to be a valuable and manageable investment it needs to be kept current and also to have its development and management distributed across the agencies and others with the expertise.

CHRRUPP also developed a regional information system, the Central Highlands Regional Information

Service (CHRIS), to deliver information needed by stakeholders and as a way of viewing processes and outcomes of the planning. We found CHRIS helped stakeholders to participate in the planning process. It provided access to appropriate biological, social and economic information (as text, graphics, or maps) in easily understood formats. CHRIS information helped stakeholder groups to build and maintain a mandate from their constituents, as well as to prepare for negotiations.

We developed two software tools to help with decision-making: JavaAHP and VegMan. **JavaAHP** provides a structured yet flexible approach to organising judgements and establishing priorities. **VegMan** provides access to four groups of regional vegetation management information: facts, policies, regional vegetation strategy, and other relevant information for the Central Highlands Region, as well as to updated government policies and legislation about vegetation management.

Like CHRIS, these tools also build the capacity of stakeholders to share information and participate in the planning process. In particular, the software helped natural resource planners identify the various values associated with a resource and consider the conservation and development aspects of alternative uses. However, such tools are based on assumptions and have limitations which must be explained to all users.

We delivered the above information and decision aids via the Internet. While we recognise that there are some barriers and inequities to accessing information on the Internet, we felt it was the most useful approach as it helped us to deliver information in an integrated way. We also encouraged parallel projects, such as CHConnect through a Commonwealth initiative, to increase the ability of the community to access and use new technologies such video-conferencing and the Internet.



Understanding visions

PREFERRED DIRECTIONS

Solutions to regional problems will not be equitable if they are simply imposed by government or resolved by one or a few sectors. Enduring solutions require structured negotiation but before sectors are ready to negotiate they need to develop a 'vision' or position of their own.

In CHRRUPP, sectors did this by examining their individual issues and capacity to tackle them. During this process we found it was important to provide facilitation to encourage these groups to interact more freely. It resulted in better collaboration and negotiation and, finally, in regional R&D such as exploration of carbon trading issues. The sectors clearly varied in their capacity, preparedness and willingness to engage in regional planning.

Our next step was to help each sector think outside their own sector perspective, share with the other sectors an understanding of their own key issues and identify critical issues in which all sectors had a common interest. Five critical regional problems were identified at the first RCC meeting. These were: viability of communities; water reform; impact assessment; vegetation management; infrastructure coordination. The processes established by CHRRUPP to address these problems relied on strong support from the State and Federal governments and structured negotiation. The approaches taken to three of these regional issues are briefly outlined in the following sections on water reform, resolving indigenous issues and vegetation management.

WATER REFORM

There were several competing claims to the water resource from different sectors in the Central Highlands and only 40,000 megalitres of mean annual diversion available in the region to allocate.

The RCC developed a proposal to deal with this issue resulting in a process to structure debate about the most appropriate water development options funded by the the State Department of Natural Resources. The process involved three phases culminating in the development of an agreed interim Catchment Water Management Plan.

IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENOUS ISSUES

When CHRRUPP commenced in 1997 there was considerable discord between traditional owner groups in the region: many groups had limited planning and management capacity and other sectors had limited exposure to Aboriginal interests. However, opportunities existed in a fledgling regional Aboriginal group that had a significant history of dialogue with the mining industry, and there were significant investments in cultural heritage and native title claims. So CHRRUPP focussed on strategically improving conditions for regional negotiations and secured funding for the group to develop the structures and strategies for negotiations of regional level agreements. This

resulted in the formation of the Fitzroy Basin Committee of Elders which works to support member traditional owners' groups to make decisions affecting the Fitzroy Basin.

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

High rates of land clearing have raised vegetation management as an issue and source of conflict, in particular between the pastoral, local government and conservation sectors. Early in the CHRRUPP process these three sectors developed their own proactive strategies to improve regional biodiversity through positive vegetation management initiatives. At the same time the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency developed a broader Regional Vegetation Management Strategy in partnership with the sectors (VegMan also assisted with the distribution of relevant vegetation information).

In 1999 development of Queensland's *Vegetation Management Bill* resurrected tensions between the conservation and production sectors. Through negotiation hosted by the RCC, these sectors have now reached agreement on the principles for progression of regional vegetation management plans.



Influencing policies, laws & organisations

We found that for good negotiations between sectors it is important to ensure that participants are equally well-informed about technical and scientific issues, the extent of interests and values, the costs of not resolving the issues and the institutional environment framing the problem. It is equally important (and challenging) to ensure that all interested sectors are identified and effectively represented in negotiations, i.e. that representatives have a clear mandate from their constituents.

In dealing with conflicts between sectors over their 'visions', CHRRUPP's experience suggests other regions need to:

- apply sophisticated process technologies and facilitation skills
- focus attention on understanding the social and economic impacts of natural resource use change
- use facilitators who have a high level of content knowledge and community trust
- have a genuine commitment to power being devolved from government.



The third cornerstone of a healthy planning system is the establishment of institutional arrangements that support integration among planning activities and equitable negotiations amongst sector interests.

Regional planning is composed of many concurrent planning activities at various scales, within numerous sectors and even within different program areas of a single government agency. Often natural resource management problems are addressed by imposing new initiatives, which can end up poorly integrated in an already complex set of existing activities and institutional arrangements.

We found integrating planning very challenging. We were often reactive rather than proactive. However, it was easier to envisage ways to integrate new planning activities where we had a clear sense of the needs of a more effective planning system.

We tried to facilitate more integrated planning by:

- using the RCC as a central integrating mechanism to bring sectors together to work on priority issues
- working across sectors to assist linking and use of existing planning activities
- integrating upwards with other regional initiatives
- doing research into reform of planning and impact assessment, which resulted in a package of potential reforms for negotiation between the State government and the sectors involved.

Improvement in the delivery of government services was another area of institutional reform we targeted. CHRRUPP did not aim to progress long term and strategic reform in government, however, it did actually stimulate some reforms. CHRRUPP mainly

encouraged local and State government to improve how they went about regional planning and evaluate their own capacity to plan. Sector-based planning was not attempted with Federal agencies because of the limited presence of these agencies on the ground. Reforms arose because each tier of government was a sector in its own right in this sector-based planning approach, leading to greater networking between key agencies.

Five local governments introduced strategies to reform their service delivery resulting in common regional approaches to assets management and land use planning, and cooperative regional service delivery, for example in regard to pest management. The State government Regional Manager's Forum (Central Highlands Public Sector Forum) provided the forum for more integrated planning and service delivery. This forum determined common priorities for regional action on sustainability issues and established an integrated funding model to help progress whole-of-government responses to priority issues in the region.

Critical lessons for the government sector that can be applied to other Australian regions include:

- the need for commitment to whole-of-government approaches
- the need to use opportunities to act collectively as this bolsters potential interventions from higher level policy changes
- the need to improve internal integration between certain spheres of government so that work can start on service delivery reform between State, local and federal agencies.

Maintaining momentum & keeping on track

MONITORING, EVALUATION, REFLECTION

Informed decision-making processes also depend on our ability to monitor and evaluate the state of natural resources and progress towards sustainable management. It is critical that programs and activities can be and are effectively evaluated by policy makers, program managers, regional coordinators and community members. The CHRRUPP project included formal evaluation based on practical criteria to assess and monitor change. This formal assessment also provided continuing feedback to the regional planning process on the impact of the project. In assessing the project's impact, environmental, economic, social, institutional and technological criteria needed to be considered, such as:

- individual and organisational learning effects (e.g. new collaborations, partnerships, strategic alliances and networking)
- behavioural changes (e.g. new skills, new planning processes and sharing of information)
- impacts on accepted norms or standards (e.g. new ways of assessment and access to information)
- social effects (e.g. system and networking externalities)
- contributions to knowledge bases, scientific progress, and human and social development
- resolution or amelioration of resource use issues (e.g. improved water management and rehabilitation of riparian vegetation).

One lesson from our experience with evaluation was that the context of regional planning is critical. A range of social, economic, environmental, institutional and technological factors frame the planning system, the policy response, the implementation process and the onground performance.

Within any community there are many established influences that shape the way people relate to natural resources (their environment) and ultimately the sustainability of these natural resources. The success of whatever initiatives or changes are made in that community will depend upon the existing context of these established influences, and will continue to do so.

KEEPING PEOPLE ENGAGED

Keeping people involved throughout the planning process is important to maintain momentum on issues and to build the relationships and trust that are required for equitable regional solutions. We found that developing trust - in the process as well as amongst participants - takes time and varies across sectors.

CHRRUPP aimed to be a very communicative and participative process that kept people engaged. The RCC and the four regional services developed to support the planning process were instrumental in this. The RCC was an inclusive, cross-sectoral forum for progressing regional issues. It was a forum for structured negotiation that strengthened social ties and was able to drive change. A project communication strategy identified the communication needs of the sector groups and other project stakeholders and determined useful engagement strategies. The evaluation strategy allowed for more responsive and effective planning, and showed people that they could make a difference in the project and in the region.

We learnt that simple administrative support and facilitation is important in keeping people engaged. For example, to keep momentum on issues between the RCC meetings (held quarterly) it was important to use teleconferences. We found it important that we became involved in the community either by maintaining a presence there or by employing local people in the process. Engaging influential people is essential to establishing local credibility and it provides access to important people and networks through which we were able to influence policy development and planning processes.



Further reading

CHRRUPP website: <http://chrrupp.tag.csiro.au/>

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MORE INFORMATION

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