

Critical issues in regional natural resource management

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Introduction

Paradigm shifts are frequently spoken of but rarely observed. We may, however, be witnessing one in the way we approach the management of natural resources.

The traditional 'top-down' model of centralised natural resource management (NRM) that relies on governments for planning and implementation is no longer in favour. It is being replaced with processes that rely on participation by citizens in their own regions.

This emerging paradigm is called *civic regionalism*. The term is shorthand for the decentralisation of authority and resources for NRM to regional citizen boards and statutory committees. There are many examples of this at the federal level (under the Natural Heritage Trust II) and in the states (particularly South Australia, NSW and Queensland). A similar shift in governance—the approach to government and management—has been underway in social and economic policy.

As a new approach, civic regionalism is being pursued in different ways in different parts of Australia. Even so, there are three concepts that dominate this model of NRM:

1. NRM needs to be scaled-down to the regional level so that management efforts can be focused on a single geographic unit.
2. Government has failed to secure environmental sustainability (or, at least, government action has proven ineffectual) and so alternative ways of managing need to be found.

3. Citizen participation should be central to the development and implementation of NRM strategies. Instead of being treated as stakeholders, the citizens of any given region should be directly engaged in policy development and implementation.

The support for civic regionalism has been florid. Cries of ‘let the locals lead’ (Head 2004, 30), or of a need to ‘give power back to our communities’, or ‘it is vital to cut the bureaucratic red tape ... that is strangling on-ground action’ (The Wentworth Group 2002, 3) are but a few examples. Critical debate about these changes—and what they might mean for Australia’s environmental future—has been far less colourful and frequent.

Fortunately there are precedents. Some 60 countries around the world have pursued decentralisation as a means of improving governance across a range of policy sectors, including environmental management. Australia also has its own history of policy development for regions, albeit ‘patchy, non-systematic and ideologically driven’ (Rainnie 2005, 132). So, as Australian governments develop and support civic regionalism, they are not moving into unexplored territory but instead following a well-worn trail.

There is a significant body of Australian and overseas research from which lessons, questions and problems can be discerned. Some sit uneasily with some of the arguments in favour of civic regionalism. The purpose of this discussion is to identify issues that are central to the capacity of civic regionalism to deliver, and consider them in the light of available evidence. In the final section, some thoughts on the way forward are presented.

Issue 1: Is the ‘region’ the appropriate scale for NRM?

Civic regionalism is based on an assumption that it is possible to identify a ‘region’ that is a single geographic area that is the ideal size, or scale, for managing natural resources.

This assumption implies that a region can be seen as either a ‘community of common interest’, or as an ecological unit such as a catchment or a bioregion.

There are problems with both definitions. Defining a region in terms of a community ignores all the evidence about how gender, ethnicity, class, age and other forms of social identity can divide so-called communities. The other ‘ecological’ definition of a region makes the mistake of favouring one scale over others. This can cause problems because ecological changes are often patchy and occur across several scales, possibly ranging from metres to hundreds and even thousands of kilometres. This means that ‘there is no single right scale for management’ (Pritchard and Sanderson 2002, 150).

Regardless of how a region is defined, another problem is created. How can we reconcile differing social, ecological and jurisdictional regions to enable borderless management? Will state governments, for example, cooperate just because they manage parts of the same ecological region?

To use a well-worn phrase, environmental problems don't respect jurisdictional boundaries. Even where a 'region' is identified and managed as a single unit, jurisdictional boundaries are fixed and often impede the development of integrated environmental solutions. In addition, civic regionalism creates new jurisdictions and boundaries, and might in fact create an entirely new boundary problem for other institutions such as local government.

Scale creates complex problems for NRM, particularly when the causes (and solutions) of some environmental problems are considered. For example, national and international commodity markets have a strong—even dominant—influence on how Australian farmers respond to policy initiatives when making land management decisions. In this context, limiting NRM to one scale makes it impossible to address the underlying causes of environmental degradation.

Instead of the kind of single-scale management that has been promoted, perhaps we need to be thinking of *nested* institutional capabilities—some focussing on particular scales and some working *across scales*. NRM, even under a model like civic regionalism, needs to be multi-level.

Issue 2: Will civic regionalism be more effective?

Civic regionalism is often promoted as being more effective because local citizens and their communities are closer to environmental problems and solutions than a remote government and its policies and regulations. Being close to the problem, it is claimed, brings greater understanding and more effective solutions.

The argument is appealing because regional civic organisations are most likely to respond to immediate and obvious environmental problems such as traffic, noise, flooding or soil erosion. Herein lies the power of local action. However, the causes of resource management problems are often uncertain and systemic and the solutions may be beyond the local region.

In fact, closer is not *always* better. There is a constant danger of regional citizen boards becoming parochial in their management strategies and priorities. For recently established groups, this can be explained by a lack of knowledge; for other groups it can be explained by a lack of appreciation of the wider decision-making framework or the wider scales at which environmental problems are manifest.

The short-term and parochial focus of citizen-based environmental planning has been highlighted by a number of researchers. In Napier's (1998) comprehensive study of soil conservation efforts in the mid-west of the United States, the parochial focus of farmers and local groups limited their capacity to deliver major improvements in land management. In Australia, reviews of the Natural Heritage Trust have highlighted the ephemeral character of groups receiving financial assistance, the short-term benefits of their work, and the lack of a wider, strategic direction in their work.

The argument that 'closer is better' is further complicated in Australia by the extent of publicly owned land and natural resources. Publicly owned land is, of course, owned by all Australians—those nearby as well as those living in distant cities. A risk of civic regionalism is that, by passing

responsibility for environmental management to regional (non-government) boards, we face another set of problems—including a virtual privatisation of public resources, the need to develop new mechanisms for accountability and, of course, the political marginalisation of distant stakeholders. These very problems have been realised in the western United States; a recent review of this experience concluded that:

‘The views of distant stakeholders should have equal weight in decisions involving public resources. *Public* officials should make decisions about *public* resources.’

(Kenney et al. 2000, 401, emphasis added)

Issue 3: Can regional boards deliver?

The idea of regional boards is often promoted by comparing an ideal with a caricature—locally knowledgeable, flexible and motivated groups are better able to deliver than a remote, clumsy and ineffectual government bureaucracy. Such an argument, driven as it is by ideology, assumes that regional citizen boards and committees have the necessary *capability* to deliver more effective and efficient management and governance.

There are three key issues associated with regional organisational capability.

1. Does the group have the necessary human, social and economic capital to undertake necessary tasks effectively? What will be the costs of creating that capability?
2. Can they perform effectively within appropriate timeframes, given the urgency of existing environmental problems?
3. Do local citizens *and* distant stakeholders see these regional organisations as having the legitimacy to act? Legitimacy is possible in the long term only if there are appropriate structures and mechanisms to ensure accountability.

The capability of regional boards and other civic organisations cannot be taken for granted. Some regions, such as the Wet Tropics, where for more than a decade regional NRM institutions have been assiduously developed and well-funded, are likely to be able to grasp the opportunities and potential of civic regionalism. Others are likely to struggle, particularly newly-created groups or those in the sparsely populated, arid interior.

Issue 4: Will civic regionalism be more efficient?

In theory, civic regionalism is more efficient because those directly concerned with NRM will be directly involved with policy delivery and implementation, and the inefficiencies of government can be avoided. No longer would we see ‘bureaucratic red tape ... strangling on-ground action’ (The Wentworth Group 2002, 3).

In practice, however, the costs of establishing this new approach could swallow up some gains in efficiency that may otherwise be achieved. Civic regionalism is a social experiment, and a long-term investment in developing the capacity of regional boards is necessary (Paton et al. 2005). The short-term costs, at least, may be as high as those of traditional regulatory approaches.

The reason is that civic regionalism requires different skills. Planning has changed. Under civic regionalism, solutions cannot be imposed (vertically) from above; they must instead be negotiated (horizontally) with multiple players, including government agencies, community and non-government groups as well as private companies. These players have differing capabilities, degrees of authority and, of course, power (Hamel et al. 1999). This is nothing less than a new approach to ‘statecraft’ and environmental planning for governments (Lane and McDonald 2005).

As governments and citizens become accustomed to working horizontally, it soon becomes very clear that they need skills in mediation, conflict resolution, enabling skills, organisational management, community development, and so on. Re-skilling may indeed become another cost of civic regionalism. The need to build the capacity of volunteers and others to be able to do various tasks has become well-accepted in many sectors, but this should be another reminder that processes relying on volunteers are neither free nor fast.

As Theodore J. Lowi has remarked:

‘How much time does this ... take? My answer to that question is inspired by something I learned from Shaw a long time ago: democracy will fail, because there aren’t enough evenings in the week!’

(Lowi 2000, 73).

Issue 5: Will regional-scale governance be more integrative?

Civic regionalism has been promoted as a means (among other things) to better integrate the use, allocation and management of natural resources. It is seen as a way of addressing concerns about ‘fragmentation’ or ‘lack of coordination’ in environmental governance.

This assumption—that governing at the scale of the region through regional groups will enhance the integration of policy and management—is remarkable and unwarranted. The allocation, use and management of natural resources is a complex, multi-jurisdictional domain in which many non-government players (from market and civil society) jostle with diverse government players to determine environmental policy at different scales. Furthermore, because many of the causes of environmental problems are extra-regional, regional bodies will be required to coordinate the activities of more powerful government and market forces operating at broader scales.

There is no question that better integration of policy and management is needed. Efforts to improve our use of natural resources have been constantly frustrated by lack of integration in policy design and by the lack of vertical and horizontal harmony in processes of governance.

This problem is multi-faceted and not necessarily solved by civic regionalism. Aspects include:

‘(i) the complex and dynamic character of Australian federalism, (ii) the rigorous defence of agency fiefdoms, (iii) inefficiencies, duplication, contradictions and inconsistencies across policies, (iv) a lack of continuity caused by almost constant programmatic and structural change, (v) a loss of public confidence in both the processes of governance and government, and (vi) the rapid shift of NRM policies to community-based programs without adequate funding and other support.’

(Morrison et al. 2004, 247)

If civic regionalism is to be more integrating, the *vertical* roles of regional bodies relative to local, state and federal governments will need to be clarified and made to coordinate. It will also require greater structural and procedural reform of federal and state NRM agencies to provide for greater *horizontal* integration. (The Australian Government’s recent ‘Whole-of-Government’ initiative is a welcome gesture here.)

There will also need to be far greater clarity in the relationship and integration of the functional roles of the multitude of NRM plans and other instruments being used by all levels of government. It is impossible to overstate the need for this kind of reform. In the Wet Tropics region of north Queensland, for example, McDonald and others (2003) report that there are currently more than 120 current plans in operation!

Finally, the remarks made above about the need for new skills and a new toolkit for environmental managers in Australia are relevant here. Integration is as much about process as it is about substance. Integrative environmental managers are those that understand processes of consensus building, collaboration, networking and conflict resolution.

If we look for evidence of how effectively we use the various techniques of governance, we have no further to look than negotiated agreements between mining companies and Indigenous Australians. Recent research shows that these agreements poorly reflect the needs and interests of Indigenous communities (O’Faircheallaigh and Corbett in press). If working horizontally requires new skills, we rapidly need to acquire them and the structures to be able to use them effectively.

Issue 6: Will civic regionalism enable better-informed management?

A central tenet of civic regionalism is that regional boards increase the level of citizen participation, and that this inevitably allows the development of context-sensitive NRM strategies. This is based on two ideas, both of which relate to the relationship between local experience and centralised management:

1. central governments tend to impose ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions that ignore local conditions
2. greater citizen participation will improve NRM by using local knowledge.

These ideas need some discussion.

The potential for central government to develop a one-size-fits-all environmental policy is a failure commonly attributed to top-down planning—the need for policy to be customised to specific regions is a major rationale for decentralisation the world over. If the widespread failings of decentralisation don't give cause for pause, then the fact that the drivers of environmental degradation are extra-regional and that many of the resources under question are publicly-owned, might. Much more importantly, there is no *structural* reason for state and federal governments being unable to think and act in a way that is sensitive to regional differences—ecological and social.

It is seductive to suggest that local, experiential knowledge can be combined with scientific knowledge to produce more effective plans. There is, however, almost no overseas evidence to support the claim that this can be better achieved by *decentralisation* (Kellert et al. 2000).

The issues are not simple. Little is known about how citizen groups use knowledge—of various kinds—in policy development and implementation. Fears that NRM could easily lose its scientific rigour to citizens' views and experiences may have already been realised in the Natural Heritage Trust I (Lowe 2004).

The challenge for civic regionalism is to bring the various kinds of knowledge together when developing management strategies, rather than allowing these knowledges to compete—one laying claim to rationality, the other to morality or local wisdom. We need to learn how to use both so that our management plans are both effective and just.

Issue 7: Is civic regionalism more democratic?

Civic regionalism is widely held to be more democratic than top-down NRM from a centralised government. The basis for this belief is that decentralising management to citizen boards and other bodies helps improve the fairness of decisions, overcoming the insensitivity of centralised bureaucracies to local and regional difference. Such a model crudely assumes an inverse relationship between democracy and geographic scale.

Since justice is as important as effectiveness in NRM, fairer outcomes and better democracy is a crucial issue.

Regrettably for ardent decentralists, there is no demonstrated correlation between democracy and smaller units of governance (Ehrenberg 1999). Localised, participatory efforts can serve to buttress the position of local elites, enforce conformity, and eliminate difference in political processes. For example, some groups of people have been very poorly represented among Landcare groups (Lockie 2001). There are reports of cases where decentralised NRM has resulted in undemocratic decision-making processes and an inequitable distribution of resources.

The treatment of Indigenous Australians under the Natural Heritage Trust I is also suggestive of this trend (Lane 2005). Clearly, incorporating the view and knowledge of people with little power is not automatic.

‘The question is one of power. Who has access to resources and can deploy them in order to disadvantage others? Clearly, it is not the holders of indigenous knowledge who exercise the power to marginalize ... The criterion of power will triumph when local, traditional, or practical knowledge is contrasted with global, modern, or theoretical knowledge.’

(Agrawal quoted in Howitt 2001, 38)

This does not mean that civic regionalism is, by nature, undemocratic. It does mean that regional governance that relies on citizen participation must be designed to explicitly ensure accountability and fairness.

Democratic civic regionalism and environmental justice can be secured only by processes that ensure that:

- everyone can participate and not merely the articulate or the organised
- decision-making processes are not dominated by elites
- effective mechanisms for dispute resolution exist
- regional bodies are accountable both to the citizens they represent and to the governments that fund them.

All of this requires, in turn, a more detailed consideration of how regional policy is constructed. As indicated earlier, it also requires new skills for environmental managers.

Issue 8: Is civic regionalism empowering?

In bringing democracy to the regional level, improved levels of civic engagement will, we are told, empower communities to better manage their affairs and local areas. The process is assumed to enhance citizens’ political skills, and this is expected to ensure that government becomes more democratic and effective. Combating inequality is central to this framework.

This is a tall order. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence from both here and overseas that decentralized, civic approaches have entrenched the power of elites, enhanced the severity of local conflicts, and increased intolerance toward minorities.

While capable communities might flourish under such a decentralised approaches, others might be further disadvantaged because their existing geographic, social and economic circumstances impede their ability to take advantage of changing circumstances. As Rainnie argues:

‘the language of empowerment and self-activity can easily fit into a neo-liberal approach which allows the state to wash its hands of responsibility for less favoured regions, arguing that salvation now lies in their own hands.’

(Rainnie 2005, 137)

Another problem presents itself in countries like Australia, where there are profound problems of environmental justice for Indigenous peoples. Can regions and communities develop an image of themselves that will be inclusive rather than exclusive? If they cannot, civic regionalism will see the excluded being further disadvantaged. The evidence from Europe on this precise point is far from encouraging.

Finally, despite all the talk about community participation, there is precious little evidence that efforts to facilitate participation and inclusion have become more effective. Spouting the importance of participation and inclusion is one thing; achieving effective citizen participation across populations that vary according to wealth, knowledge, ethnicity and gender is another. A recent book ponders the provocative question of whether participation is the new tyranny (Cooke and Kothari 2001). What is striking about the thinking presented is that it so closely resembles a refrain of Leonie Sandercock's written nearly three decades ago:

'The demand for public participation in planning has become the great populist red herring of the seventies in Australia. Evidence of both overseas and Australian practice has shown that ... it is not an effective way of involving the 'have-nots' in decision-making: all the procedures so far tried are biased towards involving the middle class.'

(Sandercock 1978, 117)

The way forward

It is far too early to tell if the headlong rush to organise governance around the principles of civic regionalism will halt environmental degradation and secure a sustainable future for Australia. Civic regionalism is a social and environmental experiment.

As with other policy fads, civic regionalism will have its successes and failures, and it is likely to create new difficulties and problems of its own. We therefore need an ongoing critical and impartial debate about how to get the best of what civic regionalism offers and to avoid its most treacherous pitfalls. Australia must look to the following:

1. Central governments will continue to play an important enabling role

Civic regionalism promises environmental governance that is done 'by the region and for the region'. Evidence from many parts of the world, however, suggests that the role of national and state governments will continue to have critical enabling functions—facilitating regional development, developing the capacity of regions and communities, maintaining a strategic gaze and, where required, mediating contests among participants with reference to national and international standards of good governance, fairness and democracy. We need to recognise this rather than seek to diminish this role.

2. Environmental managers need new skills

Civic regionalism presumes an entirely different approach of *doing* policy and governance. The environmental managers of tomorrow need new skills in working horizontally, building enduring collaborations, mediating disputes and maintaining networks. Quite literally we need to re-skill our environmental managers.

3. Scientific information is needed to make good NRM decisions

Environmental science is too crucial to become marginalised in the development of management strategies. Instead, we need to continue to invest in environmental science and ensure that it plays a prominent role in the development of management approaches.

4. Research from the social sciences should be built into the development of civic regionalism

NRM has moved into the social sciences by changing the scale of governance, emphasising citizen engagement, and recognising the role of multiple players. Designing effective governance arrangements therefore requires far more effective utilisation of social scientific research and advice. The evidence from institutional experiments elsewhere—such as decentralisation—needs to be taken into account when the new institutional framework is being designed.

5. Monitoring of ecosystem function and organisational performance is essential

The tendency of ecosystems to change unpredictably is in part responsible for the new mantra of environmental managers—adaptiveness. Environmental managers must now be adaptive to surprise events and changes, recognise that their interventions are themselves potential sources of (unpredictable) ecological change, and that their efforts are *experiments* in ecological intervention. We therefore need to be much more assiduous in monitoring and auditing the performance of regional and other NRM organisations and using those data in designing and re-designing our institutional framework. This requires political will, considerable investment and the development of new methods.

6. Civic regionalism requires an increased investment in environmental management

The cost of developing regional capabilities and ensuring performance may be very high, at least in the medium term. We must be prepared to pay this price if civic regionalism is to deliver. The influential report, *Repairing the Country*, estimated that the cost of repairing the Australian landscape was \$60 billion (NFF/ACF 2000). If this is correct, and if the other development costs of civic regionalism are as high as expected, more funds for NRM will be needed than currently exist. Greater investment is essential.

7. Environmental information must be freely available

Since the functional and democratic potential of civic regionalism rests so heavily on the ability of communities, regions and non-state participants to engage directly in policy development and implementation, environmental information—scientific and other—needs to be widely and freely available.

8. Civic regionalism must be part of a multi-level approach to NRM to succeed

International experience (for example, Geddes 2005) makes it clear that the effectiveness of local and regional efforts depend heavily on the practices of higher levels of government. NRM needs to be seen therefore as a multi-level, multiple-scale activity in which the enabling behaviours of state and federal governments are crucial. Some have expressed concern that decentralisation might actually constitute ‘passing the buck’, or that it will paradoxically result in increased centralised control (Gerritsen 2000). If the benefits of civic regionalism are to be achieved these possibilities need to be avoided and multi-level partnerships developed and maintained.

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