

Victoria's catchment management framework: caring for our catchments

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Introduction: The Catchment Management Framework (CMF)

The Victorian Catchment Management Framework (CMF) is alive and well as it approaches its first decade of existence. The CMF was established under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act (1994)* with the primary institutions being the Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC) and the ten Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs). Their major partners are the Department of Sustainability and the Department of Primary Industries.

However, many other institutions and groups contribute to catchment health. These include local governments, water authorities, educational and research institutions, agricultural and industry organisations, indigenous communities, Landcare, Waterwatch and other community groups and individual people who care about natural resources and their management.

So the CMF is a complex of entities, overlain by the processes and activities that keep the framework ticking: strategic planning, investment, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting, and all manner of partnerships and other relationships.

How we got to where we are now: The Almanac

Recently the VCMC commissioned David Cummings to compile the Victorian Catchment Management Framework Almanac of significant events in catchment management in this State. The Almanac chronicles over 500 events ranging from the small, such as the Thistle Act 1856, which was the first weed control legislation and recording the first soil conservation field day in 1943, through to the large, such as the Water Conservation and Distribution Act 1881 (Cummings, 2005; and available on the VCMC's website at www.vcmc.vic.gov.au).

This description of the evolution of catchment management and many things related is really the story of people, of organisations, of ideas, of experiments, of successes and failures that enable us to have sense of how we have got to where we are now. And some ideas about where we could/should travel in the future.

Some of the really significant community movements which culminated in the CMF were Landcare, Salinity Action groups and the catchment-based waterway management authorities. Many of the most valuable characteristics of the current CMF are derived from these regional community activities which started decades ago.

Not all community actions were positive but major actions at the community level paint the picture of where we are today.

1859: Rabbits introduced at Winchelsea

1859: Board of Agriculture established
1870: Local Forest Boards established to protect remaining tree cover
1880: Field Naturalists Club of Victorian formed
1914: Local Government takes on administration of weeds legislation
1920: First “red rain” (Mallee dust) over Melbourne
1939: First erosion control symposium
1940: Regional Planning Committees formed
1941: Regional Soil Conservation advisory committees formed
1944: Save the Forests campaign started (forerunner to Natural Resources Conservation league 1951)
1949: Land owner’s afforestation movement established
1957: Society for Growing Australian Plants formed
1961: Whole farm planning concept
1965: Australian Conservation Foundation established
1977: The “Garden State” era commences
1982: Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers formed
1985: Salinity Taskforce and Program established
1985: Potter Farmland Plan starts
1986: Landcare is launched in Victoria
1988: Catchment Co-ordinating groups formed
1989: National Landcare Program commences
1990: Commercial sponsorship of revegetation commences (Alcoa)
1992: Waterwatch established
1994: Catchment Framework with 10 regional Boards established
1997: CMAs with community Boards established
2000: International Landcare Conference

Between and during these times, significant legislative change and the formation, variation and closure of various Government entities responded to and supported the community needs. The thread of community ownership and leadership is evident throughout.

1997 arrangements: How the CMF started

The search for the ideal institutional model for natural resources management (NRM) continues on the global scale. There is no ‘right answer’: models range from the minimalist approach of nothing much at all, through various combinations of local and/or regional arrangements dealing with any number of functional aspects of NRM, right through to centrally managed all-engulfing national models.

In Victoria, following on from decades of NRM being undertaken by large numbers of not very clearly differentiated agencies, and excluding some geographic areas and functions entirely, a decision was taken to look for a new and improved way of doing things. In 1997, the Catchment Management Structures Working Party was set up to review the existing catchment management service delivery and advisory arrangements across the State of Victoria (Geraghty, 2002).

While some strengths were acknowledged at that time, the following issues emerged as providing significant opportunities for improvement:

- greater community empowerment through increased involvement in determining service delivery;
- increased integration of service delivery on inter-related issues;
- gaps in floodplain management, rural drainage, waterway management and Crown frontage management;
- more effective targeting of investment and service delivery to regional priorities;
- strengthening of links between strategic planning and implementation of works and accountability;
- confusion, overlap and duplication; and
- policy direction on waterway management and catchment management (Catchment Management Structures Working Party, 1997).

The CMF institutions

The response to the review was the establishment of an over-arching suite of ten CMAs covering the entire State, alongside regional NRM and primary industries agencies, plus local government, water authorities, industry, agriculture and community groups, all players in NRM to varying degrees. These regional arrangements are nested within State and Federal legal, political and institutional systems.

CMAs generally are made up of:

- a skills-based Board which is directly responsible for the development of strategic directions for land and water management in the region and ultimately responsible for all the functions undertaken by the Authority;
- implementation committees which are responsible for advising the Board regarding detailed work programs and provide a direct linkage to community; and
- authority staff, including a CEO, business manager, technical and field staff and administrative personnel.

Each CMA is responsible for a range of NRM planning and advice, service delivery, monitoring and reporting functions, with the service delivery functions focusing on waterway, floodplain and rural drainage management. Each CMA is responsible for the development of a Regional Catchment Strategy, which is the blueprint for the management and protection of land and water resources in that region, signed off by Australia and State Governments and the basis for prioritising investment in NRM in each region. Each CMA also develops a three year Corporate Plan and negotiates with investors in agreeing on an annual project-based works program for the CMA, DSE, DPI and other service providers, documented in annual Regional Catchment Investment Plans (Catchment Management Authorities, 2006).

The role of Catchment Management Authorities includes:

- delivering on-ground works across the region
- strategic planning
- developing of regional partnerships
- community engagement
- reporting
- managing floodplains, works on waterways and volumes in rivers

- managing the Environmental Water Reserve.

The Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC) was established at the same time. The VCMC is the State Government's peak advisory body to the Minister for the Environment on catchment management. The Council is uniquely placed, since it is independent of government agencies, regional CMAs and non-government organisations, to take a long-term view and influence change in working towards its vision for catchment management:

'Victoria will have healthy rivers flowing through ecologically sustainable and productive catchments'.

The major statutory roles of the VCMC include:

- providing advice to the Minister for Environment The Hon John Thwaites, MP (and any other Minister) on matters relating to catchment management in Victoria;
- developing an Annual Report to the Minister and State Parliament on the operation of the *CaLP Act*; and
- providing of five-yearly reports on the environmental condition and management of land and water resources in Victoria.

The next of these reports is due to be tabled in parliament by the end of October 2007. This Catchment Condition Report 2007 report should be able to be picked up by the key partners in Victoria's Catchment Management Framework and provide an overall view of the condition, management and future of the ten catchment regions, as well as a statewide picture of our catchments. The Council sees that this is the single most critical activity in which the VCMC is engaged.

The previous report from 2002 (VCMC, 2002) is still widely used. Here are some of the comments from stakeholders at a workshop on 7 September 2005.

- *The document is unique and comprehensive.*
- *It was used in national planning.*
- *Spatial layout was unique at the time.*
- *First CMA/catchment level report across the whole State.*

Highlights were: the specific section on knowledge management; the vision; tremendous co-operation to get the document together; the citing of overseas trends and experiences; the realisation that the data in many cases did not exist; the fearlessness of the commentary.

The fact that the 2002 document made the first page of *'The Age'* newspaper (an unusual if not unique occurrence for an NRM report) means that the next report has a lot to live up to!

As I said, the VCMC is well placed to make a difference in the way that the Victorian community perceives the current and future condition of our natural resources and the way that the community, the custodians, manage them.

CMF processes

The past year has seen the accreditation of the last of the ten Regional Catchments Strategies (RCSs) prepared by the CMAs on behalf of their regional communities. This is a great achievement for the CMF as a whole.

However, the documents themselves, good as they are, are only part of the story. Behind each of the RCSs lies a multitude of people, a huge effort to engage with urban and regional communities, increasingly sophisticated information and knowledge systems, robust debates about the asset-based approach, about the vexed question of identifying long term and more immediate targets and prioritising among the myriad important things that could be undertaken in a catchment. The CMAs are to be congratulated on coordinating such complex activities culminating in the RCS documents.

The RCSs do not in themselves set out the funding details for the NRM agencies in the region. The investment process is derived from the priorities identified in the RCSs and the actual dollars are the result of negotiations between the investors and the region via Regional Catchment Investment Plans (RCIPs). Each year, CMAs develop an RCIP as the basis for funding of projects and programs to achieve the NRM outcomes specified under the accredited RCSs and State approved regional sub-strategies.

The RCIP process brings the various interested parties together to negotiate in order to best integrate investment to achieve the agreed outcomes in the region. The State and Australian Government investors are provided with the information they need to make informed decisions about which NRM projects to invest in. Overall, the RCIP process enables each catchment management region to implement the RCS priorities and outcomes, in line with State and Australian Governments' overarching policy framework and priorities. Hence the RCIP process is really about informed conversations, which has got to be a good thing for NRM.

CMF relationships

The VCMC and each of the ten CMAs report directly to the Minister for Environment. So the CMAs do not report to the VCMC. However, collaboration between the VCMC and the CMAs is enabled by a number of activities. These include cross membership on VCMC committees such as the Natural Resources Knowledge Management Committee CCR 2007 Project Management Group; through CMAs presenting to Council; through VCMC participation in the Chairs and CEOs' Forum; and through co-hosting of the Victorian CMF Conference.

While there were some issues in the first few years of the CMF, regarding particular aspects of regional relationships (The Virtual Consulting Group, 2000), generally the various players are now working well together. The only strains seem to occur when there are emergency responses required. For example, the recent Grampians bushfires put much stress on agencies and communities.

Given our learnings over the past decade, it may well be time to review the CMF.

Regional relationships are complex and require goodwill and a consensus approach since there are many players in NRM. However the Regional Catchment Strategies provide an avenue whereby all the priorities in a region can be identified, on behalf of all interested parties. Once the higher level and longer-term priorities have been agreed, there needs to be a process for negotiation by investors regarding which management actions will be taken, by whom and by when. Translating the Regional Catchment Strategy into a suite of activities is all about relationships, based on a clear understanding of each group's roles and responsibilities.

Equally, while we have well developed Regional Catchment Strategies, the next step may well be the development of a State Catchment Strategy.

In the broadest sense, the investors are really the whole community: we all invest in NRM directly, or more indirectly through our governments. And we are all part of the CMF family and its friends.

The objectives of the Catchment Management Framework

The objectives of the CMF are:

- community involvement in and commitment to natural resource management;
- ecologically sustainable development of natural resource-based industries;
- maintenance and improvement in the quality of water and condition of rivers;
- prevention and reversal of land degradation;
- conservation and protection of the diversity and extent of natural ecosystems; and
- minimisation of the impacts of pest plants and animals.

Note that the very first objective is about communities. NRM cannot happen with our communities being involved and committed to caring for our catchments. In addition to their passion, communities and landowners contribute \$3-5 for every dollar invested by governments.

While you could say that the objectives are all stating the bleeding obvious, the actual 'who?' and 'what?' and 'when?' and especially 'how much?' questions are not easy to answer.

Community Engagement Activities

Urban engagement

The Merri Creek Management Committee was formed in 1989 to achieve a shared vision for the waterways in the Merri Creek catchment, which flows from the Great Divide through Melbourne's northern suburbs to the Yarra River.

The Management Committee is made up of representatives of all the Municipalities in the catchment, and the Friends of Merri creek, a community-based group with a broad range of individual, household and corporate members. The group currently is

undertaking a range of works on 80 sites along the Creek and its tributaries, funded from a range of sources including Landcare Australia, Envirofund, EPA, member Councils, the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA, Melbourne Water and philanthropic Trusts.

As a measure of the extent of community engagement, some 26 community activities were organised in 2004-05, involving the planting of 41,000 plants as well as 12 activities for schools. Waterwatch alone involved 2,700 students from 42 schools, assisted by over 1 300 people from the local community and supported by 79 community monitors (see www.mcmc.org.au).

While there are significant numbers to draw from in metropolitan communities, the success of the Merri Creek project is wonderful testament to broadscale urban engagement, which can serve as a sound model equally for non-metropolitan urban communities.

Partnerships

The South West Sustainability Partnership was formed in the Glenelg Hopkins CMA region in 1998. It brings together the CMA, Western Coastal Board, Water Authorities and educational institutions to develop and implement processes for sustainable development in South Western Victoria. The operating framework is built around co-operation, collaboration and free exchange of information. One outcome of this approach has been the adoption of a Sustainability Blueprint for the region, resulting in an increased focus on the management, conservation and restoration of the region's natural resources.

This has in turn led to a greater acknowledgment of the competitive advantage the region has in agriculture, food and fibre processing, tourism and related service industries.

Populations are changing, in Victoria and elsewhere. However, raw population numbers tell nothing like the whole story. Some of the variants include: inflows and outflows of people in a community; peak populations (eg in popular coastal resorts); diversity within communities; migration of young people; age structures; and peri-urban growth; that is the areas around regional centres. There is a clear and concise explanation of the interactions of these factors in the stories in 'Regional matters. An Atlas of Regional Victoria 2005 (Victorian Government 2005). The work of Neil Barr on these matters (Barr 2005) makes interesting and somewhat frightening reading.

A brief snapshot reveals:

- the non-farm economy continues to grow;
- males entering farming are five years older than in 1981;
- older farmers have delayed retirement; and
- farm numbers are declining rapidly in dry land farming areas.

Contrasted with:

- tree change/sea change leading to population growth in coastal areas, and inland within two hours of Melbourne;
- increase in lifestyle/hobby farm numbers on “good farming land”;
- regional centres growth as they absorb people from the surrounding region.

The challenge for NRM is to find new ways to engage the new demographic and land use. In the peri-urban and coastal areas, there is already some evidence of increased Landcare activity, at least in membership numbers. We must ensure this interest is retained and developed into action.

The growth of “commercial farming” in dryland areas generates a separate challenge. New tools such as the concept of Ecosystem Services are evolving and will hopefully become an essential part of future large scale farming operations.

We certainly live in interesting times!

Landcare

Even Landcare itself is changing, as reported by Allan Curtis and Penny Cooke (2005) who concludes that we are at a tipping point where insufficient investment in the fabric of Landcare is undermining its capacity to contribute to more sustainable NRM. There are further opportunities identified in that study for Landcare and CMAs to provide support and coordination for Landcare groups.

The CMAs are making a concerted effort to actively engage with their communities, be they metropolitan, regional and rural. As the regional coordinators of the Regional Catchment Strategies and investment plans, it is imperative that they do so and that they do so inclusively, whole-heartedly.

Corangamite, Goulburn Broken, Mallee, North East, Port Phillip and Westernport, West Gippsland, Wimmera, Glenelg Hopkins and East Gippsland CMAs have all developed Landcare Support Strategies. North Central CMA is running a second generation landcare program for community projects by groups and in some cases individuals to address a range of issues. Funding is provided for - Project coordination, Community education, capacity building and group maintenance, On-ground works for protective fencing, revegetation, protection and enhancement of remnant vegetation and habitat and pest control.

And the climate is changing, whether we like it or not.

Key messages

So, in summing up, what are the key messages for the future regarding caring for our catchments?

In the midst of all these changes, we need to be clear about what really matters. For me, without going into the rationale and philosophy underpinning my list, here is a summary of what matters to me as the Chair of the VCMC:

- the development of a Victorian State Catchment Strategy;

- the Catchment Condition Report 2007 and regional reporting on the condition and management of our natural resources;
- being better able to show what we get for the investment made in NRM;
- relationship between VCMC and CMAs;
- the White paper on protecting biodiversity and restoring land;
- linkages with Local Government and with Landcare;
- reviewing and improving the Catchment Management Framework; and
- keeping faith with our communities.

There are plenty of exciting challenges to meet. I look forward to doing just that with all of you.

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