

Protocols, Principles and Strategies Agreement for Indigenous Involvement in Land and Water Management

North Central Region, Victoria

Introduction

The Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC) is the peak body for providing independent advice on issues relating to catchment management at the State level. VCMC facilitates an integrated and coordinated approach to catchment management through Victoria's catchment management framework.

In 2000, a representative of the Yorta Yorta Nation was appointed as a member of VCMC. This was the first time in the four-year history of VCMC that an Indigenous person had been represented on the Council. This appointment was instrumental in raising the awareness level of other Council members to Indigenous matters regarding land and water management and brought a number of new issues onto the VCMC agenda.

In October 2000, VCMC sponsored a meeting with several representatives of Indigenous Nations in Victoria. At this meeting, a number of issues were addressed relating to land and water management. One of its outcomes was an agreement on the need for the development of a set of Protocols to facilitate participation of Indigenous Nations in natural resource management activities.

Developing the Protocols

In January 2001, the VCMC endorsed the development of statewide protocols for the involvement of Indigenous peoples in land and water management. Council subsequently sought and obtained an NHT grant to develop a statewide framework which would be used to inform the development of specific protocols, between individual Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) and individual Indigenous Nations, in accordance with joint aspirations and expectations.

The first step in the project was to appoint an Indigenous consultant to visit all traditional Nations and CMAs, to facilitate development of the statewide protocols.

The main objectives of the first stage of the project were to identify issues for investigation and discussion and to collate existing information. The consultant reviewed some of the current literature and activities in the area of protocols and agreements and produced an overview of elements that could be considered in a generic framework. The elements outlined in the report provided a good basis for moving forward to the next stage.

The complexity of the task of developing a statewide framework that could service the needs of both individual traditional Nations and the CMAs became increasingly apparent. Not just the complexity in dealings between Nations, between Nations and Cooperatives and between Nations and the CMAs over protocols, but also the scale of resourcing and time required to consult all stakeholders to the appropriate level of detail, even for

generic protocols. It was resolved that the project should change scope from a generic State framework to a pilot project, involving the development of protocols and principles between one CMA and the Indigenous Nations lying within its (catchment-based) boundary.

A meeting was held in April 2002, targeting a cross-section of both CMAs and Indigenous peoples to promote discussion on elements to be included in a generic framework. At this meeting, the North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA), North West Nations Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation each volunteered to participate in a pilot study involving the development of protocols in the North Central Region.

The VCMC consultant met with the North West Nations and the NCCMA in May 2002 to introduce and discuss the protocols project. The discussions were very positive and the parties recognised that the first step towards the achievement of an engagement process was to reach agreement on the purpose, protocols, principles and strategies. This formed the basis for further discussions and initial ideas were incorporated into a draft agreement.

In July 2002, the draft agreement was circulated to all parties who sought comment from internal Board members and other relevant stakeholders. Comments were collated and a revised draft was re-circulated. Thereafter, the VCMC continued to liaise with the parties and refine the protocols agreement from this point on.

A Workshop was held in September in Bendigo with representatives from Yorta Yorta Nation, North West Nations, NCCMA and VCMC. The Workshop provided an opportunity for all parties to collectively (having already considered responses individually) negotiate the final agreement. A further draft was later distributed and final comments sought.

The final agreement was printed in November 2002. It was formally signed by the NCCMA and Indigenous representatives from North West Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Dja Dja Wurrung Clan, Yorta Yorta Nation and Jaara Jaara at a ceremony held at the Victorian Catchment Management Conference in Bendigo on 22 November 2002 (Figure 1). The ceremony was considered a great success and Indigenous representatives spoke on the tremendous achievement of reaching an agreement on how to engage with the CMA. VCMC and Yorta Yorta member Monica Morgan also led discussion at a complementary workshop session at the Conference on *Involving Indigenous Communities in Natural Resource Management* where she spoke on the process for developing the protocols agreement.

What is the Protocols Agreement?

The Protocols, Principles and Strategies Agreement for Indigenous Involvement in Land and Water Management is a landmark agreement for the North Central Region of Victoria to encourage the participation of Indigenous peoples in planning, consultation and implementation of natural resource management within their traditional country.

The protocols are essentially guidelines on how to engage effectively on land and water management issues. They provide direction on how to interact and work together whilst acknowledging ownership of country and recognising and supporting the rights and responsibilities of all parties. They are underpinned by a set of principles for engagement and practical strategies to achieve open, respectful and cooperative communication for the achievement of better natural resource management solutions.

Conclusion

The NHT co-funded project has been completed and the NCCMA and those Nations signatory to the agreement now assume the responsibility of following through with the implementation of the protocols. This project should be seen not as an end point, but rather as the start of an ongoing process which will require continued effort and patience, not only on the part of the signatories, but the VCMC and broader catchment stakeholders as well.

The project has been timely, coinciding with the five-year review of Regional Catchment Strategies (RCS) by CMAs. The RCS review and renewal process requires that CMAs liaise with a range of regional stakeholders, including Indigenous people, when determining priorities for natural resource management over the next 5 years. Whilst, in this case, the signing of the protocols did not take place until well into the RCS review process, NCCMA has taken measures to ensure that an Indigenous viewpoint has been considered and included in their RCS. Parties have agreed that a review of the protocols will take place on a five-yearly basis in conjunction with the review of RCS. It will also be important for the signatories to develop performance indicators to measure the extent to which the protocols have been successful.

Clearly, it is important that the participation of other Indigenous Nations of the Region, those not involved in this project, is facilitated. As a starting point, members from NCCMA and North West Nations have agreed to visit other Indigenous Nations, whose boundaries fall within the Region, and encourage participation in the protocols process.

The VCMC hopes that eventually new protocols agreements for land and water management will be entered into by other CMAs and Indigenous Nations across the State. While the North Central agreement has been tailored to suit the needs of the signatories, the content is largely generic and could easily be applied to other regions. Some Indigenous Nations in other regions have already expressed interest in the protocols. There

remains considerable scope for other CMAs to employ a similar protocols process.

Further Information

Contact the VCMC office on (03) 9412 5045 for additional information or for hard copies of the *Protocols, Principles and Strategies Agreement for Indigenous Involvement in Land and Water Management* and the final project report detailing the process undertaken to deliver the protocols. Electronic copies of the reports can be downloaded from the VCMC website at www.vcmc.vic.gov.au



Figure 1. *The signing of Indigenous Protocols for land and water management in the North Central Region at the Victorian Catchment Management Conference, 22 November 2002, Bendigo.* Clockwise from back: Lee Jo Aichem (Yorta Yorta Nation); Drew English (North Central CMA); Rick Nelson (Dja Dja Wurrung); Kenny Stewart (North West Nations); Brian Nelson (Jaara Jaara); Elizabeth Hoffman (Yorta Yorta Nation); Monica Morgan (Yorta Yorta Nation).

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