NRM AND THE COAST: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract

Community engagement in coastal NRM has had an uneven trajectory in Australia. There have now been three phases of coastal NRM that include a role for the community: NHT I–1995-2002 supported the Commonwealth's Coastcare program; the regionalisation process of NHT II introduced Envirofund (2002-2008), and the most recent community grants scheme was set up as part of Caring for Our Country (2008-). To date there has been no overview or holistic review of coastal NRM and community engagement in Australia that tracks these transitions and phases. Each of these phases has been explored separately (i.e. Coastcare under NHT I, and regional delivery under NHT II and so on). However, as an adaptive learning strategy it would be pertinent to explore the key lessons from each phase and consider the findings with the purpose of informing future initiatives and transitions. This paper will provide an overview of the coastal NRM transitions with the intent of tracing the engagement of coastal communities, over time. This will be achieved through desk top studies of the Commonwealth data sets and annual reports.

Introduction

There have now been three decades of federal funds committed to natural resource management in Australia through three principal programs (NHT I, NHT2 and Caring for Our Country) (see Figure 1). As a consequence significant human capital, time and financial resources have been put into the development of NRM. The policies and programs have been described as an 'ambitious experiment' (HC Coombs policy forum 2011a). Several reviews and commentaries have ruminated over the Commonwealth's modes of NRM delivery exploring challenges and successes since NHT I began (HC Coombs policy forum 2011a). However, there has been very little attention paid specifically to the coastal and marine environment and consideration of the successes and failures of the investment strategies in this regard.
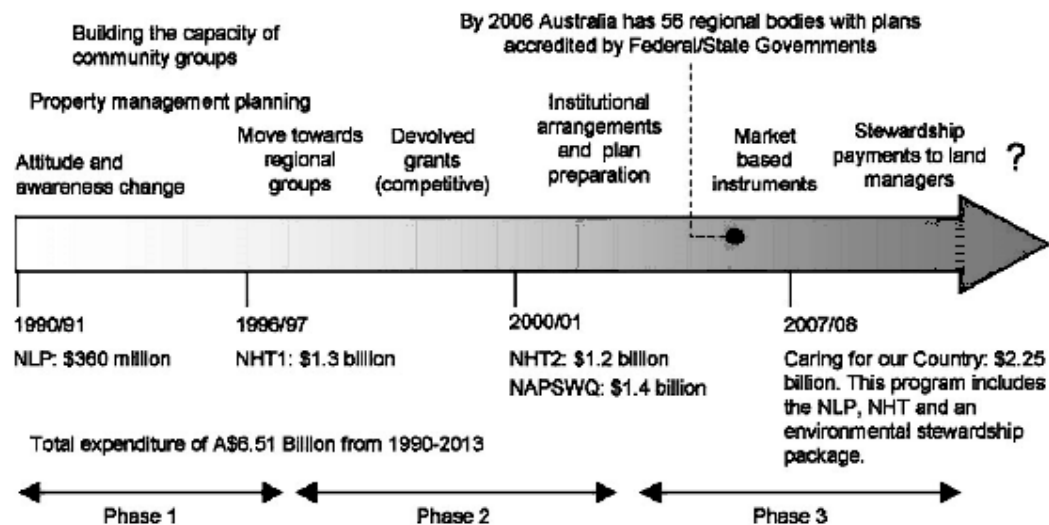

**Figure 1: Phases of the Australian Governments NRM programs
(HC Coombs policy forum 2011a: 4)**

Coasts deserve special attention because the complexity and dynamism of coastal environments arguably creates more diverse challenges for mangers than those in rural Australia. Land tenure arrangements also set coasts apart. Coastal NRM projects are largely carried out on publicly owned or managed coastal terrestrial and marine locations. The role of the community in helping to fulfil the goals of NRM and to assist in halting environmental degradation in Australia is well documented. The nature of public participation at the coast is distinct to terrestrial environments however, where engagement takes place on publicly owned land. The motivations and commitments to engagement therefore require special attention. This paper offers an overview of the federal government's programs dedicated to furthering NRM. In particular the treatment of coast and marine NRM through the three phases and programs is analysed with attention given to the treatment of community level initiatives and support.

NHT 1 (1996-2002)

NHT I, an initiative of the Howard government, commenced in 1996. It had a strong focus on partnership development between different tiers of government and the community. The Trust had three overarching objectives.

i.   Biodiversity Conservation
ii. Sustainable Use of Natural Resources
iii. Community Capacity Building and Institutional Change

The coast received special attention under NHT I with a separate formal agreement, (the Coasts and Clean Seas MoU), a dedicated suite of programs, and a separate funding 'bucket' through which to furnish them. Coastcare, a community engagement strategy designed specifically to support and encourage local communities to participate in activities designed to protect and enhance the coast, was one of the flagship programs of the coasts and marine suite of NHT I (See Figure 1). Due to the segregation of funding for coastal programs Coastcare held a distinct position compared to other 'Care' programs (like Landcare, Bushcare and Rivercare), because it was administered separately.

The Coastcare program was designed around a small grant scheme. Anyone with an interest in undertaking on-ground works (as specified by the federal government) in coastal environments could apply, through a competitive process, for grants of up to $30,000. A matched funding scheme between the federal and state governments provided the funds for the grants. Expert coastal state assessment panels vetted the applications. Working in conjunction with the grant scheme was a network of support personnel, 'regional facilitators', who were employed by the federal government and who value-added to the grants though educating and awareness raising. The facilitators proved to be one of the most successful elements of the program (Clarke 2006). Table 2 highlights the intent of the program: to encourage active, appropriate and effective engagement of local communities and to build a sense of ownership within communities for the costal spaces they were tending. Table 2 also shows that partnership building between institutions and communities was central to Coastcare's agenda.

Coastcare is estimated to have involved 60,000 people in undertaking projects or 2,000 groups nationally during this first phase of federally funded NRM (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).
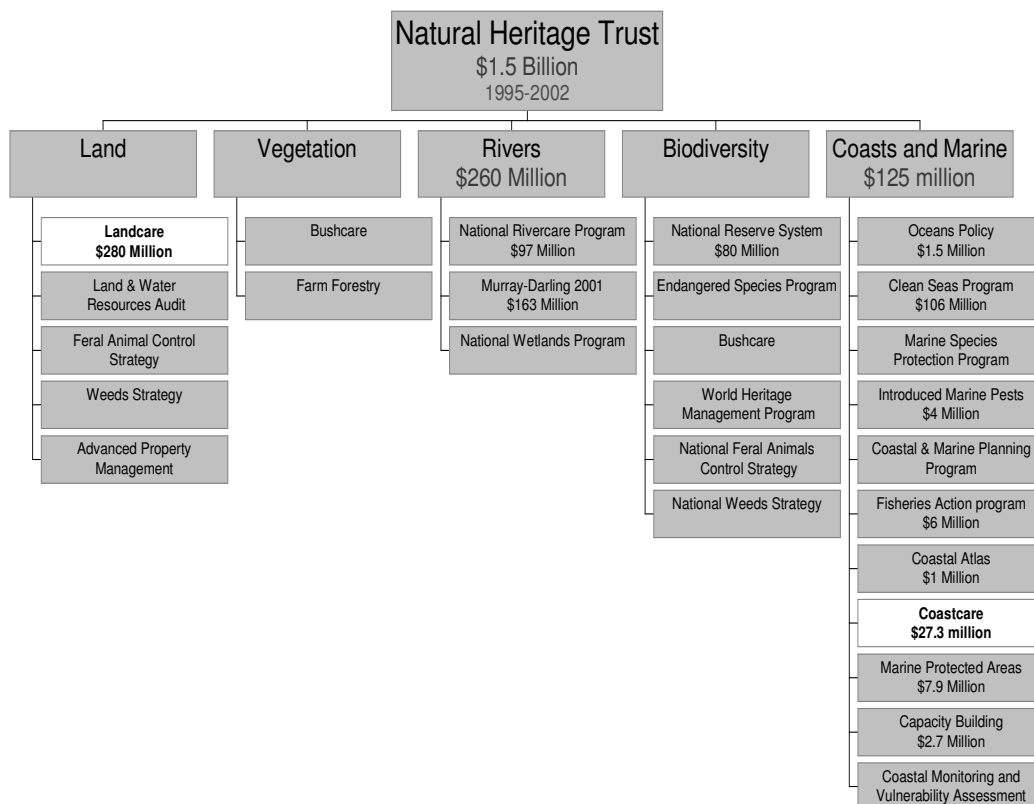
Figure 1: Structure of NHT I (1996 to 2001)
(Clarke 2003: 26)

A significant omission within the *Coasts and Clean Seas* MoU was review and performance indicators—originally requested within the agreement (and signed off on), but never developed. Despite an absence of benchmarks, Coastcare under NHT I was lauded for having made a 'huge difference to the Australian coast' (Australian Government 2004). Performance measures were based upon the program's outputs and bore little relation to the stated objectives and desired outcomes of stewardship, partnerhsips and capacity building as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Coastcare: objectives and desired outcomes (NHT I)

Objectives for Coastcare	Desired outcomes of Coastcare
To engender in local communities, including local industries, a sense of stewardship for coastal and marine areas	To have increased the level and effectiveness of community involvement in coastal management
To provide opportunities and resources for residents, volunteers, business and interest groups to participate in coastal management	To have increased the capacity of those contributing to coastal management through documentation and dissemination of best practice coastal management information To have increased the level of effective coastal management activity
To support community identification of natural and cultural heritage resources	To have raised awareness of coastal issues — the problems and possible solutions
To facilitate interaction between the community and bodies with responsibility for managing coastal areas	To have increased co-operation in and between all spheres of government and the community

((Source: Commonwealth of Australia 1998)

Implementing a national coastal program, within pre-existing jurisdictional structures responsible for managing the coast, was a significant achievement. Coastcare (1996-2002) proved to be an extremely adaptable venture, put into practice between three tiers of government that share a history of political tension and protracted negotiation over various aspects of coastal management (Clarke 2006).

Challenges—NHT I

NHT I however, has been criticised as being piece-meal and non-strategic, accused of taking a 'vegemite' approach: 'spreading funds thinly across landholders and landscapes' (Siewert 2008 cited in Robins & Kanowski 2011: 88). As such, 'the scattered grants allocation processes [of NHT I] made it very difficult to ensure the investments were making a valid and measurable contribution toward improving the condition of our natural resources' (Wensing 2008: 23). Many of the features of NHT I were dropped or transformed in the roll-over into the next phase. One of the most significant decisions was the termination of contracts for the facilitator network that had co-ordinated and supported the Coastcare program.

NHT2—Envirofund (2002-2008)
In 2001, the federal Government extended the Trust (2002-2008). Figure 3 shows that the three primary objectives of the NHT remained the same Under NHT2, however on the basis of the mid-term review of NHT I (Australian Government 2010c), a regional model was adopted as the framework for delivering investment, identifying priorities, and coordinating actions. Investments (projects and activities) were dispersed between national, regional and local scales.
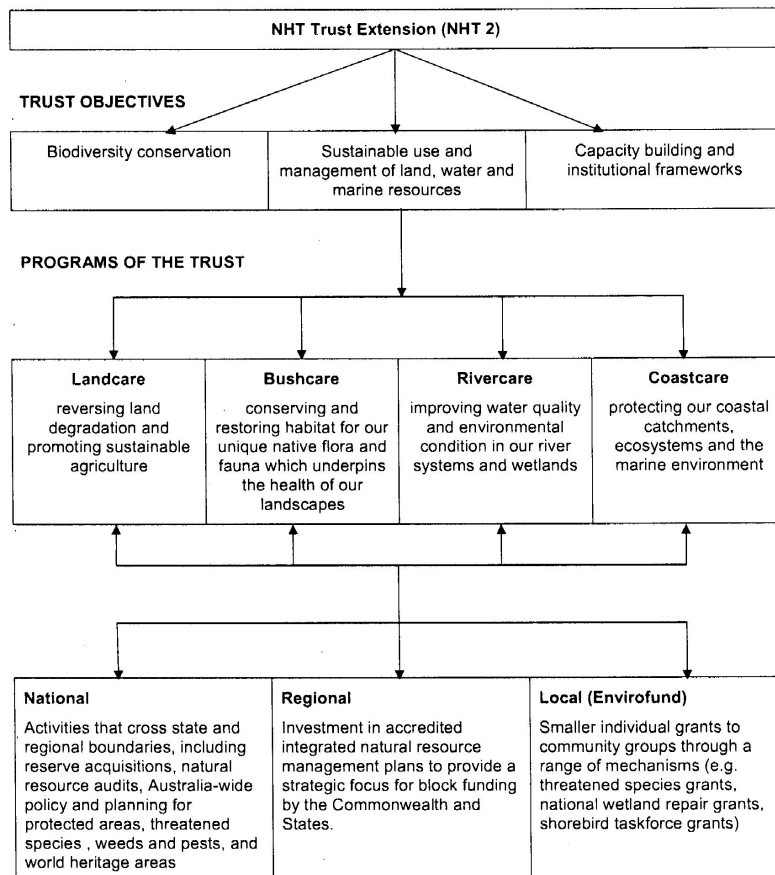

Figure 3: Structure of NHT 2 (2002-2008)
(Adapted from Australian Government 2008e)

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The process of regionalisation culminated in the formation of 56 regional NRM bodies (36 with a coastal boundary), governed by community-based boards of management. The regions vary considerably in size, population density and environmental management challenges (Robins & Dovers 2007; Wimbush 2006). They also differ in terms of status. In NSW, Vic and SA, NRM regions are 'statutory bodies of the state' (Wensing 2008: 23). With federal government assistance each regional body was responsible for preparing a regional NRM plan that outlined the specific NRM issues in the region; the actions required to address the issues; and priority areas for action. 'The primary purpose of the regional NRM plans is to provide a sound basis for making, monitoring and measuring all NRM investments on a landscape scale' (Wensing 2008: 23). Each regional plan was lodged for accreditation by Commonwealth and state/territory governments according to a set of agreed criteria (bilateral agreements). Following accreditation, regional investment strategies were developed, detailing the funds required to implement the regional plan. NHT funds were invested in the priorities set out in the investment plans (Australian Government 2010c). The 'rigour' applied through the accreditation process, between Commonwealth and State governments, is identified as a strength of NHT 2 (Wensing 2008).

In the transition from NHT I to 2 the suite of coastal programs formed under NHT I was abandoned. Coastcare was merged with other land-based community grant programs to form 'Envirofund' (Environment Australia and AFFA, 2002). Envirofund was an amalgamation of twenty-three original NHT I programs, consolidated into four—Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare and Coastcare. 'Envirofund' grants of up to $50,000 were available to applicants 'proposing activities with very high public benefit' (Australian Government 2008a: unpaginated). Funds could be used by individuals or groups to carry out work targeting local issues or to build their capacity to manage these issues. Projects were required to meet at least one of the NHT's stated priority areas, and needed to clearly demonstrate NRM benefits.

The facilitator network burgeoned to 700 positions under NHT2 including Australian Government, State, Regional, Indigenous, Local government and local level facilitators. Federally funded facilitator roles dedicated to the coast were retained at state and regional levels. Local level facilitators with a coastal remit were variously employed and managed.

Challenges—NHT2

Governance challenges

The regional approach imposed arranged relationships (Green 2006) upon state governments and the newly formed regional bodies and as such 'the boundaries between areas of responsibility [were] negotiated' (Wimbush 2006: p.91). According to Wimbush (Wimbush 2006: 91), an outcome of the new partnership arrangements was a transfer of resources from states to regional bodies, introducing a degree of tension into the relationship. Broad scale reflection regrading the new program suggested that local government was marginalised by NHT 2 (ALGA 2005; Robins & Kanowski 2011). ALGA asserted that local government was the 'missing link' in NRM.

NRM plans

Under NHT2 funds for coast and marine environments largely relied on the inclusion of such matters in regional investment strategies. The status of NRM plans varies between regions. In NSW, Vic and SA 'plans will continue to have a place in the state's planning regime by virtue of their status in the legislation' (Wensing 2008: 23), for the others their position is not as 'safe'. Newly formed NRM regional boards inexperienced in preparing targeted plans found the process of integrating coasts a difficult one (Wimbush 2006). An MCCN review (Flaherty & Sampson 2005: 15) of coastal NRM arrangements under the NHT identified that many of these new NRM plans lacked detail concerning coast and marine matters. This is further clarified by Wimbush (2006:

92) who states that attention to coastal matters in regional plans varied 'from almost complete neglect to a comprehensive and thorough consideration of the issues' and by the SMEC evaluation of coastal, estuarine and marine outcomes of regional investment (SMEC 2006). The MCCN review suggests that absence of coastal matters in plans was perhaps a consequence of the lack of coastal experts on NRM board membership. The marine environment was also neglected and cross-regional boundary issues, of particular significance in coastal environments, were not explicitly addressed either.

Engagement

In comparison to Coastcare during NHT I, there was a dramatic decline in small grants dedicated to coastal projects through Envirofund in terms of both the number of projects and amount of allocated funding (Clarke 2006). The CIE (2005) evaluation of Envirofund noted the low share of Coastcare programs compared to other activities (CIE 2005).

A SMEC evaluation (SMEC 2006: 48) of investment in coastal and marine NRM discovered there was some confusion across the NRM bodies and stakeholders about the various roles of the different facilitators. The potential for duplication of effort and competition for resources for apparently similar duties and activities was reported. In addition an evaluation of Envirofund (CIE 2005: 64) revealed that facilitators did not clearly understand their respective roles and responsibilities, duties and functions in regard to this small grant scheme.

The regional delivery model is considered to be an appropriate one for channelling funds to strategically derived plans (Robins & Kanowski 2011), being a more coordinated approach (HC Coombs policy forum 2011b) and to have designed integration and delivery through bodies based upon bioregional boundaries (i.e. catchments) (HC Coombs policy forum 2011b; SMEC 2006). There was political commitment from the Howard Government to continue the program beyond 2008. Negotiations over bilateral agreements were 'well advanced' at the time of the call for the 2007 federal election (Wensing 2008).

Caring for Our Country (2008-)
In 2008 the incoming Rudd government swiftly replaced NHT 2 with a new initiative, *Caring for Our Country* (CfoC) that 'integrates delivery' of a number of previous natural resource management programs (Natural Heritage Trust, the National Landcare Program, the Environmental Stewardship Program and the Working on Country Indigenous land and sea ranger program). Figure 3 illustrates the CfoC framework, its goal, the six priority areas set in place to achieve the goal and CfoC's 'business approach to investment'—clearly articulated outcomes and priorities, improved accountability through target setting (Australian Government 2008b; Wensing 2008: 22) (Australian Government 2008d). '*Coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats*' serve as one of the six national priority areas under CfoC.

The distribution of funds under this business approach however, is through targeted programs and for specific sites: the Great Barrier Reef, Ramsar wetlands, critical aquatic habitat, and a number of coastal 'hotspots'.

CfoC rhetoric suggests the scheme is dedicated to community engagement. Targets have been set to have at least 500 community organisations engaged in coastal and marine rehabilitation, restoration and conservation actions (by June 2013). Towards this end, in the transition year from NHT2 to CfOC, support for coastal community groups was provided through 'Community Coastcare' grants. The 2009-10 business plan however, announced the cessation of this separate scheme. Instead Community Action Grants of between of between $5000 and $20,000 are dispersed on a competitive basis to community groups who will contribute to the CfoC priorities (Australian Government 2008c).

A limited number of facilitator roles have been carried over to CfOC. A rationalisation of facilitator positions occurred during the transition from NHT2 to CfoC. There are 'regional officers' working at a state/territory level supporting program and project delivery and informing policy makers on regional issues (Australian Government 2011a). These positions correlate with state level coordinator roles of the past. Regional Landcare Facilitators are the single local level positions to have been carried across from NHT2 and are dedicated to supporting Landcare groups with sustainable farm and land management practices and protecting terrestrial environments. Under CfoC there are fewer federally funded facilitator positions and none with a dedicated coastal focus. NRM bodies have filled gaps, funding their own facilitators, but availability of information about the number, focus and continuity of such roles is patchy.
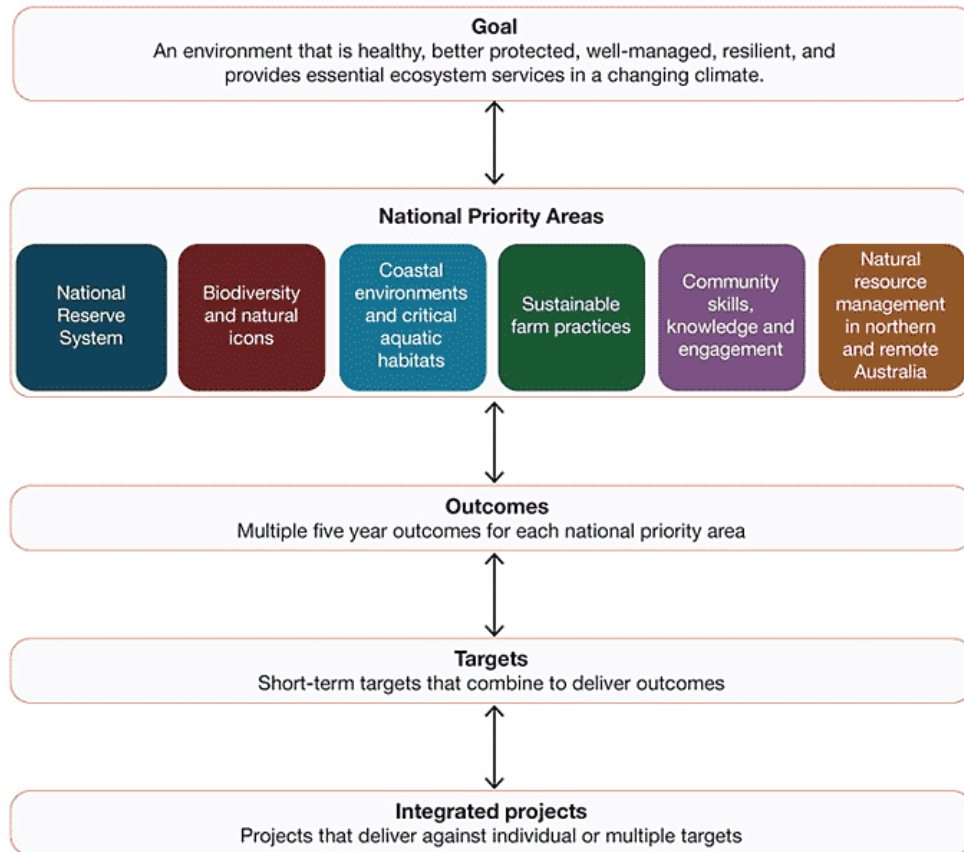

Figure 3: Caring for Our Country framework (Australian Government 2008b)

Challenges—Caring for Our Country

Through CfoC the Australian Government has re-centralised and narrowed the agenda for NRM, reinforcing politically favourable short-term, measurable outputs. This approach has the potential to reduce the benefits of investments made through previous state/territory governments and programs. The arrangements under CfoC may also widen the gap between regional NRM bodies and 'local constituencies' (Robins & Kanowski 2011: 90). According to findings of the HC Coombs policy forum there is a perceived decrease in Australian Government 'commitment, leadership and clarity of role regarding its relationship with regions in NRM' (HC Coombs policy forum 2011b: 2). The arrangements which existed for measuring state contributions—including 'in-kind' contributions—are no longer in effect. However, the Commonwealth expects states and territories to continue to invest in NRM programs at a level at least equivalent to that invested under NHT (Australian Government 2010b).

Discussion

Governance arrangements affecting coastal and marine environments have varied considerably under evolving NRM frameworks. A number of central themes specific to coasts and community engagement emerge from this overview and are discussed in turn below.

Special consideration for coastal and marine environments

The SMEC (SMEC 2006) and CIE (CIE 2005) evaluations of community engagement under NHT2 emphasised the special needs of community groups working at the coast. Work on public land tends to require very motivated and organised community groups that have a strong sense of ownership of projects and places. Due to the dynamic nature of coastal environments, 'Coastcare' activities require knowledge and skills that are not as easily transferred as other 'cares'. Capacity building is therefore an important component of NRM funding for coastal groups. Funding coastal capacity building initiatives provides for long term NRM outcomes (SCAT 2011), but current arrangements lack clarity as to who is responsible for (HC Coombs policy forum 2011c), and, make it difficult to support resourcing the delivery of, community capacity (SCAT 2011).

Role of community—reliance on volunteers

Submissions to the 2011 CfoC review (Australian Government 2011b) suggest that coastal community engagement deserves closer attention by policy makers. According to the Australian Coastal Society 'Community groups have been unable to find a direction or niche under [CfoC] arrangements' (ACS 2011: 4). There is concern regarding the over-reliance on volunteers to provide what once were government funded positions. Burn-out and lack of resourcing for support roles are noted as matters to be addressed.

Funding cycles

The activity of community groups working on coastal NRM with Australian Government funding has declined over time, demonstrated by reduced funds and number of projects. Figure 4 illustrates that coastal communities were most active and best funded under NHT I when Coastcare was a standalone program. The gradual fall way of activity under NHT2 suggests that the removal of the facilitator network and the targeted strategic investments based on NRM plans failed to sustain higher levels of coastal community engagement. CfoC has maintained coastal community grants activity and funding at NHT2 levels. This would suggest that dedicated funds for coastal activities is warranted (Wimbush 2006).

Facilitator network

It is possible that the abandonment of the dedicated coastal network of facilitators in the transition to NHT2 has been partially responsible for the decline in attracting coastal community grants. Facilitators roles as collaborators, brokers and conduits between grassroots groups and other agents (local and state government, NGOs, etc) was significant in NHT I and there exists a real gap in the current delivery of federal NRM initiatives at the coast. According to SCAT's (SCAT 2011) submission to the CfoC review, 'long term sustainability of community involvement hinges on the provision of ongoing support delivered at the local level. This is best achieved by dedicated facilitators'. SCAT argue for increased core funding to NRM bodies to retain/employ such positions. Short term contracts and rolling policy cycles have introduced uncertainty for staff in facilitator positions, and encouraged their rapid turnover, and hence, considerable corporate memory loss. Hard won trust of coastal volunteers has been eroded since the first programs were rolled out. Overall this cycling of staff results in a loss of expertise at the coast.
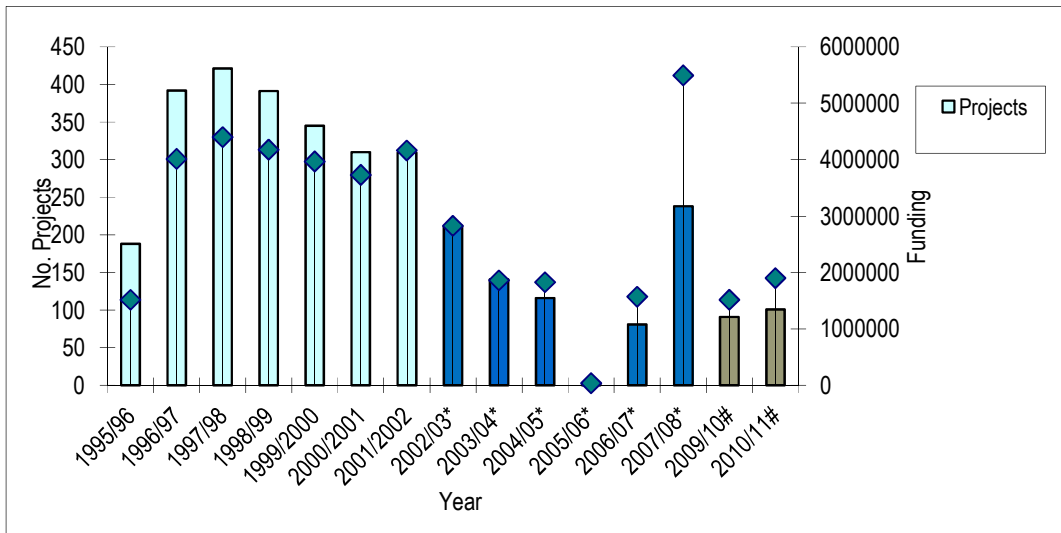
Figure 4: Community grants, funding and projects (*NHT2, #CfoC)
Source: (Australian Government 2009; 2010a; Clarke 2004)

Governance (local government role)

There has been a different governance model for each NRM phase under review. NHT
I encouraged partnerships through a tri-partite agreement between federal, state and
local government. While this arrangement had some success (especially for coasts),
negotiations were protracted. The regional approach to NRM is widely supported
(Australian Government 2010b; HC Coombs policy forum 2011c) and the benefits of
managing across the catchment to coast continuum were welcomed (Flaherty &
Sampson 2005). However, the teething problems of NHT2 were not worked through. A
reinvigoration of NRM plans that included a stronger coastal and marine focus for
investment was required. There is concern that the value of the plans has not been
realised with the switch to targeted investments of CfoC, investments selected by the
Australian Government with little consultation. Therefore, under the recentralised CfoC
regionally significant issues have not been addressed (ACS 2011: 4). The SA NRM
Council in its submission to the review of CfoC stressed that a process for encouraging
regional and local input into setting targets is warranted (South Australian Government
2011). The benefits of an enhanced role for local government in NRM has been
identified since NHT2 (Green 2006) and remains a neglected sphere in coastal NRM.

It's all about people—the social dimension of NRM

The business model of CfoC has introduced a targeted and highly strategic approach
to NRM delivery. The focus of evaluation is centred on outcomes and on-ground
achievements (both more easily measured than higher order outcomes). For long term
success, practical efforts require sustained support, and this is not adequately provided
for coasts under the existing mechanism. The HC Coombs forum state that 'human and
social dimensions of NRM are often poorly understood and integrated within NRM
policies and programs that support regional NRM planning' (HC Coombs policy forum
2011c). Evaluating the social elements of NRM such as development of stewardship
(especially important at the coast) and partnership building (the elements of
engagement that enhance and encourage continuity and persistence) should be
included and measured in evaluation frameworks.

Conclusion

The three phases of Australian Government NRM (NHT I, NHT2 and Caring for Our Country) have each incorporated rhetoric about the importance of coasts and made a space for coasts in their planning frameworks. The relative positioning of coasts within these programs though has shifted over time, largely as a consequence of changing political landscapes. Coastal NRM under NHT I was most distinct perhaps because it emerged at the culmination of the influential 1993 Resource Assessment Commission Inquiry into the coastal zone, and at the time of the release of the Commonwealth's 1993 coastal policy. Coastal NRM relinquished its separate positioning in the reshuffle of NRM under the incoming Howard government and the associated shift of attention to water, dryland salinity and terrestrial environments. The most recent political sweep by the Rudd government has seen coastal NRM re-defined again through a narrow and spatially selective lens.

Each of these transitions has been followed by researchers, commentators and affected stakeholders, albeit with little attention specifically to coasts. The evaluations and reflections suggest that much has been learned through these transitions. The non-strategic NHT I was replaced by regionalised NHT2. CfoC focuses on targeted investments and accountability, addressing flaws of the previous schemes. However, in the scramble to improve and to 'freshen' initiatives, important successful elements have been discarded, replaced or remodelled when perhaps the original was the best.

For programs to be truly sustainable in the approach to environmental management and community engagement, more direct attention must be paid to appropriate indicator development and long-term funding commitment guaranteed, to support the important efforts of volunteers on public lands. Engaging volunteer support and subsequently maintaining motivation for involvement in management activities along the coast has taken concerted past effort.

The evaluations and reflective studies to date have not thoroughly canvassed the opinions and experiences of coastal community groups in the way the Landcare community has been tracked. Further investigation is warranted to detail the effects of the transitions upon local group productivity so that policy makers can be made aware of how their decisions translate at the local level. It would be beneficial to understand how the community has traversed the swings and roundabouts of policy shifts and turns. Such information may serve to support the next iterations of NRM planning for coasts.

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