

Engaging with Indigenous Communities in Natural Resource Management: Advice for Agencies

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Abstract

Engaging government agencies in matters of natural resource management is a core challenge for indigenous coastal communities. Drawing on case studies and experiences of both authors with working on collaborative coastal management programs, this paper reflects on how to broker effective engagement processes. Insights include that engagement must recognise that the engagement must be mutual, i.e. have shared goals; that traditional owners have their own equally legitimate interests; that internal community structures and politics play a role, just as they do within agencies; and that the processes must suit Indigenous decision-making structures and timeframes.

Engagement with Indigenous communities must go beyond the superficial, thus management mechanisms must build levels of cross cultural literacy to ensure effective engagement occurs. Crucial to this is the creation of mutual spaces that will allow early resolution of any conflict issues or points of divergence, thus facilitating complementary management programs based on mutual understandings.

Introduction

Engaging with government agencies in matters of natural resource management is a core challenge for Australia's Indigenous coastal communities. Two Indigenous societies are concerned with coastal and marine management, our interest here: the Aboriginal peoples of mainland Australian and Tasmania, and the peoples of the Torres Strait Islands. This paper focuses on the Aboriginal people of the state of Queensland.

In Aboriginal customary law, traditional owners, people with hereditary responsibilities to manage tracts of land and sea 'country' are at the forefront of working towards greater recognition of their natural resource management roles and rights, alongside a number of Indigenous organisations carrying responsibility for land management or the establishment of native title rights to land and sea resources. Along Queensland's coasts, some fifteen traditional owner groups have lodged native title claims which are likely to encompass matters of natural resource management (the content of these claims is confidential). In 1999, 32 traditional owner groups from Cooktown, at the base of Cape York Peninsula, to Bundaberg, the southernmost part of the Great Barrier Reef, formed the Southern Great Barrier Reef Sea Forum to collaborate in working towards co-management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park with government

agencies, and to achieve a range of other goals including a regional agreement, protection of dugong and turtle, and capacity building (Sea Forum 1999). Within and beyond the Sea Forum initiative, several traditional owner groups are gaining recognition with government agencies for marine management plans and activities (Ross et al. 2005). Traditional owners' aspirations for the management of their country is usually holistic. They do not separate land from sea, or natural resource management from cultural heritage management. Frequently, they see economic and social development goals as intertwined with 'looking after country'. Their challenges can be summarised broadly as achieving recognition of a *right* to be involved in natural resource management, achieving *respect* for their knowledge and skills, achieving understanding for their *aspirations*, building *trust and communication* with government agencies and other stakeholders, negotiating *roles* and perhaps shared management regimes, gaining *resources* for their management, and *capacity building*.

Where Indigenous communities seek to engage holistically in natural resource management, government agencies are formed and authorised to act along functional lines. Thus three separate agencies work with coastal traditional owners and Indigenous organisations with respect to marine and coastal management: the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency (which manages both land and some marine protected areas) and the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, for the fisheries function. They are at least organised to operate at large scales: where traditional owner groups are challenged by having to build and maintain relationships with several agencies relevant to their sea country, agencies are challenged by having to work with many different traditional owner groups, since each is sovereign over its own country, at a relatively small scale. traditional owners are stable, with the key figures changing only with deaths. Agencies are subject to staff turnover, necessitating the building of new relationships, though some staff remain in posts for long periods.

Government agencies have a variety of reasons for wishing to engage with Indigenous people in meeting their statutory responsibilities. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has maintained an Indigenous Liaison Unit since 1992, with a broad brief to enhance communications with Indigenous people, and a longstanding focus on conservation initiatives particularly for dugong and turtle. The Queensland Environmental Protection Agency is working collaboratively with Giringun Aboriginal Corporation in an Aboriginal ranger unit, which manages both land and sea areas, and the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries has been co-managing fisheries with one western Cape York Peninsula community, Kowanyama, for over a decade.

This paper canvasses issues in mutual engagement between Indigenous people and government agencies, but our focus is on providing advice for agencies. It derives from our recent experience in working with Queensland coastal communities from Cape York Peninsula to Bundaberg. In referring to *engagement* we look beyond public participation (Ross et al. 2002) to consider the processes of capturing

attention and focussing efforts on a matter that people consider important (Aslin and Brown 2004, p. 5). In the Giringun and Kowanyama initiatives, the community successfully engaged with its partner agency in the first instance by making the agency aware of its aspirations, demonstrating its commitment and potential contributions to a mutually beneficial arrangement, and reaching out to establish relationships.

Our advice to agencies in engaging with Indigenous communities over natural resource management includes:

- Seek a mutually beneficial relationship, whether or not this leads to identifiable initiatives and arrangements. A mutual relationship will be equitable, and have shared goals (George et al. 2004) while respecting any goals that a single party holds (Robinson et al. in press). Traditional owners have their own interests, as legitimate as those of agencies.
- Build, work through and maintain relationships. Process is as important as outcomes, and since relationships are highly important to Indigenous people, outcomes are difficult without good relationships.
- Try to understand each Indigenous group's context: culture, values, histories, geography, community composition, leadership and poverty can all affect aspirations, issues and relationships
- Compare 'interests' and seek common interest. What are each party's aspirations, and what underlying needs do these represent? For instance, traditional owners are strongly focussed on meeting customary responsibilities to look after their 'country' well, but may seek to do so in ways that also alleviate poverty and provide meaningful activity for their younger members (Robinson et al. in press). Recognise one another's responsibilities, such as looking after country versus meeting legislation. Are there areas in which these interests coincide, for instance in keeping country 'healthy, conservation of species and their habitat.
- Recognise that governance systems and associated issues differ for each party, and that this can create logistical challenges. The parties have different spokespeople (with different systems of authorisation and accountability), and different decision-making structures, processes and protocols. They are responsible for different topics, and at different scales. While Indigenous organisations can play a valuable coordinating and advisory role at large geographical scales, traditional owners can speak only for their own country and feel compromised by expectations that they work through representatives. The processes of engagement and decision-making adopted must suit Indigenous decision-making structures and timeframes, not be forced into those of agencies.
- Be aware that internal community structures and politics play a role, just as they do within agencies.
- Develop interest and trust in one another's forms of knowledge. Consider protocols for the appropriate use of knowledge
- Start modestly. Ross et al. (in press) and some of the Aboriginal groups contributing to Ross et al. (2005) advocate an adaptive management approach to building partnerships, starting small and aiming to continuously improve the working relationship as well as its NRM outcomes.

- Be open to either formal or informal processes. Some Aboriginal groups are working very effectively with agencies in informal arrangements, whereas others have sought more formal arrangements.

Ross and Innes (in press) outline some of these suggestions in the form of a framework for designing co-management regimes.

Engagement with Indigenous communities must go beyond the superficial. Engagement processes and any management arrangements they lead to must build levels of cross cultural literacy. Crucial to this is the creation of mutual 'spaces' that will allow early resolution of any conflict issues or points of divergence (Ross and Innes in press), thus facilitating management programs based on mutual understandings.

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