
Engagement between SA's regional Natural Resource Management bodies and Non-Government Organisations

Conservation Council of South Australia

July 2011

Executive summary

Non-government organisations (NGOs) play a pivotal role in natural resource management (NRM) in South Australia. By reflecting 'community values, passions, expectations and aspirations'¹, NGOs are able to use their direct links with members, constituents and/or collaborators to implement a range of on-ground, educational and scientific projects.

To achieve significant NRM outcomes, NRM bodies² and NGOs need to engage effectively with each other. Effective engagement from NRM bodies will be based on an understanding of NGO needs, capacity and functions as well as any issues that may be perceived by NGOs as a barrier to engagement.

The need for effective engagement is even more pressing with the establishment of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (July 2010) which aims to integrate delivery of environmental protection and NRM in SA. One of their key elements to achieve this is 'through an increased emphasis on collaborating, partnering and engaging local communities'³. This marks further evolution to the NRM structure in SA.

The integration process does provide an opportunity to build in improvements to build the culture of community engagement so support the broadest ownership of the NRM culture in South Australia. To that end, the findings in this report can assist in this process.

This report documents findings from a survey undertaken in 2010 by Conservation Council SA and provides recommendations to NRM bodies to strengthen engagement with NGOs by providing an increased understanding of NGO structure and function, including:

¹ *The Mutual Agreement* between SA Non-Government Environmental Organisations and Natural Resource Management Boards p. 7

² NRM bodies is used in this document to mean NRM Boards, NRM Groups and State Government agencies

³ DENR, 2010 'Improving Natural Resource Management in South Australia'

- how and why NGOs operate;
- the internal capacity and composition of NGO; and
- how these various demographics influence their preferred methods of engagement.

A total of 92 environmental NGOs were surveyed from all NRM regions in South Australia except Alinytjara Wilurara. NGOs were selected to represent the range of organisational types and environmental activities undertaken throughout the state, including NGOs involved with coastcare, landcare and bushcare activities, Friends of Parks, peak bodies and some Progress Associations.

This survey also re-examined barriers to NRM engagement identified by NGOs in the Conservation Council of SA's 2007/08 survey.

Key findings: NGO demographics and preferred engagement methods

From the large representative sample of NGOs surveyed, it was discovered that South Australia's environmental NGOs are incredibly diverse in their governance structures, age of members, purpose, length of operation, size, activities and areas of interest. The survey's findings include:

- NGOs had on average 140 volunteers, but if national, statewide and Local Action Planning groups are excluded, then the average size is 35 with 47% of these regarded as active volunteers.
- 76% had no staff, 15% had less than 2 FTE staff and 9% have more than 2 staff.
- 42% handled less than \$5000 per annum and smaller NGOs are more likely to handle less annual income.
- 72% used grant monies to operate and deliver projects and 29% were solely reliant upon grants with no other source of income.
- 45% obtained some form of income from membership fees.
- 18% of NGOs have informal meeting structures, 51% have formal meeting structures, 7% had a paid coordinator and 10% identified alternative structures such as operating under the auspices of Friends of Parks or Local Government.
- 59% had volunteers involved in their NGO who belonged to generation Y (i.e. under 31 years of age).
- 54% of time is spent on on-ground works, 13% on education, 10% on reporting and administration, 8% on lobbying, 7% on planning and 6% on capacity building.

Despite the limited financial and human capacity of NGOs, 55% said they would be interested in having a role in implementing NRM plans. About 23% recognised that they are already involved in implementing actions, targets or objectives in the NRM plan. It is not clear whether some NGOs are not aware they are implementing NRM plans or this was interpreted to mean having specific contracts with NRM.

In relation to how NGOs currently are and would like to be engaged, there were some interesting findings particularly in relation to preferred methods of correspondence and the ability to apply successfully for grant applications. For example:

- There appears to be a correlation between successful grant applications and those who are engaged with NRM personnel.

- There appears to be a correlation between successful grant applications and NGOs who receive more frequent NRM correspondence.
- There were many comments in relation to the difficulties of grant processes.
- Of those surveyed, 70% want to engage at the NRM Project Officer level, 32% at NRM Group level, 32% at NRM Board level, 8.7% at NRM Council level and there were 7 NGOs not currently engaged who want to engage with NRM bodies.
- Most NGOs require 1-3 months' notice for notification of events and grant applications.
- There was a resounding lack of interest in social networking (e.g. Facebook) as a form of communication and engagement, with only 16% expressing any interest.
- Face-to-face communication was seen as most valuable and effective (41%).
- Whilst email was an acceptable form of communication for most NGOs, there were many comments about the need for information to be sent by post, (especially larger documents such as plans) so NGOs can distribute them to other members who are not online or do not have computers.

Key findings: Perceived barriers to engagement

In the 2007/08 survey, 79% of NGOs surveyed identified some form of barrier to engaging in SA's regional NRM processes. In this survey, 36% of NGOs believed there were barriers to engaging in the NRM process and 31% perceived no barriers. It therefore appears that NRM bodies may have addressed some of the barriers previously identified. This may also be a result of the fact that fewer groups responded to this survey and only a small proportion of those originally surveyed in 2007/08 responded to this survey.

The barriers identified by survey participants in 2010 as still significant (i.e. where more people agreed it was a barrier than those who did not) include:

- limited volunteer time to engage;
- bureaucracy within NRM processes and bodies;
- difficulties with reporting, administration and grant processes;
- lack of administrative support; and
- poor communication (although there was a fairly even split between those agreeing and disagreeing that this was a barrier).

The majority of NGOs surveyed did not consider the other barriers identified in the 2007/08 survey to still be of significance. These include:

- lack of on-ground support;
- not understanding the relevance of NRM;
- misalignment of priorities;
- insincere engagement;
- not recognising the contribution of volunteers; and
- poor relationship between local government and NRM.

Although most NGOs did not perceive these to be significant barriers, there were some isolated comments relating to these barriers.

Other barriers identified in the 2010 survey included:

- over-use of NRM terminology;
- NRM bodies failing to utilise and acknowledge local knowledge; and
- uncertainty of roles and responsibilities.

The perception of bureaucracy, lack of volunteer time and difficulties with grant and reporting processes are still significant barriers to engagement with NRM bodies and processes. A number of recommendations made in the 2007/08 survey were strongly supported and these are listed below in order of support from the NGOs surveyed:

- diversify engagement methods;
- simplify funding processes;
- provide adequate on-ground support;
- establish simple communication protocols; and
- ensure purposeful, sincere and timely consultation.

Implications for engagement

To be most effective, NRM engagement approaches must reflect the variety of sizes, functions, interests and capacity of NGOs. This includes using a diversity of communication methods including face-to-face and hard-copy postal distribution. It needs to be noted some NGO members do not have computers, or internet access, or have slow download speeds.

As well as being diverse in structure and capacity, NGOs are interested in a wide range of natural resources issues, from biodiversity to climate. They are also involved in NRM from many perspectives, including on-ground works, education and advocacy.

Younger volunteers (i.e. individuals under 30 years of age) are involved in NGOs, although not in large numbers. As many NRM bodies actively engage school groups, they may have a significant role to play in encouraging enthusiasm in youth and promoting involvement with NGOs through tertiary institutions and schools.

The interest of NGOs in delivering and implementing aspects of NRM Plans underscores the importance of engaging them. It is possible many NGOs do not realise they are already implementing aspects of the NRM plans and NRM bodies could increase this perception through improved communication and education, as well as ensuring targets and objectives are worded using plain English.

Many comments were made regarding the difficulties with grant applications, reporting and administration. Since NGOs are highly reliant on grants, emphasis should be placed on providing additional support and better communication of grant opportunities. This includes ensuring timely correspondence, adequate notification and suitable methods of distributing information, recognising it can take time for information to be received and disseminated amongst members. An investigation into whether grant processes and paperwork can be simplified without compromising transparency and accountability may be useful. Where NGOs are unsuccessful in their grant applications, follow up by NRM bodies could help to ensure engagement opportunities are not lost.

Recommendations

In addition to reinforcing many recommendations of the 2007/08 survey, the 2010 survey highlights some additional areas for attention to further enhance the engagement approaches of NRM bodies with NGOs. In particular is a need to address the issue of lack of time and capacity of NGOs by ensuring a collaborative approach is taken, providing additional support and simplified processes in order to maximise opportunities for NGOs to participate. A collaborative approach between NRM and NGOs rather than a 'tiered' approach is a priority to reduce the perception that the NRM bodies are above community providing all the support and advice – communication and influence needs to work in both directions.

In addition to the recommendations made in the 2007/08 survey, the following recommendations for NGO engagement have been developed to reflect findings from the 2010 survey:

- harness and value knowledge and expertise of community groups;
- work collaboratively to maximise opportunities for NGO participation;
- ask NGOs how they want to be involved and at what level;
- provide a diversity of communication methods;
- ensure documents are written in 'plain English';
- ensure it is clear to NGOs not traditionally perceived as environmental organisations that they can have a role in NRM;
- ensure engagement processes are simple;
- simplify or provide assistance with grant writing and reporting processes.

As the new NRM delivery support services and community engagement services are developed through the integration process, it will be important to clearly define the relationships between NGOs, the delivery services and NRM boards. For a large majority of activities and services, NGOs would expect to engage with the services organisation, however, there will also need to be clearly defined communication pathways for dealing with issues that may arise at a more strategic and planning level, or where particular difficulties and challenges arise. *The Mutual Agreement*⁴ and its associated templates is one such tool that could be utilised to identify pathways forward for effective collaboration across a range of scales.

These recommendations could be developed further into a set of principles for collaboration or a memorandum of understanding, in partnership with relevant agencies and NRM bodies.

⁴ *The Mutual Agreement* between SA Non-Government Environmental Organisations and Natural Resource Management Boards