Speech notes

Environmental Decision Making in a Democratic Civil Society

Dr John Williams, Commissioner

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Thank you Catherine Cusack, and as shadow minister for climate change and the environment your presence here is much appreciated.

Welcome authors, members of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand and guests. It is with great delight that I am able to talk with you prior to the launch of a book which I am confidant will be a valuable source of information and guidance for current and future environmental professionals, such as yourselves.

As Commission for Natural Resources, I travel widely within NSW and Australia, speaking and engaging in constructive dialogue with environmental professionals.

I find that most environmental professionals are well intentioned, sometimes frustrated with their capacity to make a difference, sometimes overwhelmed with the tasks and challenges facing them, at times pessimistic given the challenges our society is currently facing, at other times optimistic given the great minds and hearts of professionals working for sustainability and the willingness of environmental professionals from all sectors to work together to achieve successful outcomes.

I am optimistic about our future although the road ahead is unlikely to be easy.

When we look at the foundations of a democratic society and a civil society within that, what are often taken for granted is the land and landscapes, the natural resource attributes and characteristics that underpin our wellbeing. But I think it is time that our society realises that unless we give very high priority to looking after our natural resource assets – our land, our water, our air, our vegetation, and our biodiversity – we put at risk the very society itself.

It is certain that we put at risk the choices that we have.

We are living in a period of unprecedented environmental challenge, at least in modern times – and as professionals we are faced with complex challenges that we have not had to deal with before.

We are observing the very real impacts of climate variability and climate change – we have seen the devastating impacts of the prolonged drought in south eastern Australian on the communities, economy and ecosystems of the Murray-Darling Basin. This has similarities to

the future CSIRO is predicting for us, some fifty years down the track, under a warming climate.

Coupled with this, while we have learnt much, we have not managed to solve the challenges presented by dryland salinity and acidification – both costly to agricultural productivity and ecosystem biodiversity. Loss of biodiversity under climate variability and Climate Change interacting with our land use and particularly urban development awaits solutions. The red gum of the Riverina and related ecosystems are dying as a consequence of river regulation.

Then we move to our precious and highly valued coastal areas where population pressures are increasing and scarce natural resources are in hot competition between urban development, agricultural productivity and biodiversity conservation.

None of this is new to environmental professionals – but perhaps what is new, is the sheer scale at which these issues are being observed and the scale and immediacy of the need for our response.

And we are seeing that short-term 'band-aid' responses will not serve us well in the future. We require responsible and effective decision making for all of society and across the whole landscape, considering environmental, social and economic needs.

How do we do this? I quote from the preface of ***Environmental Decision-Making: exploring complexity and context:***
It is now 17 years since sustainability principles became part of our legislation and policy. We have had considerable opportunity … to learn from our successes and failures in decision making …"

And we are, and need to be, a learning society. The complexity and scale of the issues we are facing require us to adopt new approaches, to learn from our mistakes and what is going on elsewhere in Australia and globally, and to be innovative in how we gather information, learn, generate new knowledge and make decisions.

Conflict between population growth and urban development

Let us take our coastal regions an example: Population can be expected to grow by another two million on our coastal system in the next 15 to 18 years. Seventy five per cent of rural population is in coastal local government areas and the coastal growth rate is around two per cent, on a national average of 1.2 per cent. Population pressures will increase and by 2050, 42 per cent of the coastline between Nowra and Noosa is expected to be urbanised.

The remaining agricultural land needs to be even more productive under climate change because it is our coastal systems that will retain the rainfall regimes that we need for our agriculture.

We are going to have to deal with this conflict between population growth and urban development and the need for our well watered coastal lands to provide the basic food systems we need as the water availability in our inland river systems, will continue to decline.

The remaining coastal ecosystems will be pushed to the brink of their capacity to withstand that change. It is where we all want to live, where we all want to recreate but are we going to spoil the very essence of why we want to live on the coast.

It is a choice we have as a society. This is where our environmental decision making, as a society, determines our future.

Environmental decision-making

As Commissioner for Natural Resources in NSW, I am particularly close to the decision making process in this State. In a complex array of legislation, organizational structures and processes, we do see some new emerging ways forward. One new possibility is through integrated community-driven decision making through Catchment Action Plans (CAPs) that are orchestrated by Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs). These CAPs are delivered by coordinated action of all arms of government and industry to achieve the 13 natural resource targets for water, land, biodiversity and community.

The CMA provides a community interface with government to build a non-statutory plan that addresses how we manage our regions so that all of the ecosystem values and services are managed in a transparent and connected way – this is the intent. Perhaps we have a way to go but our recent audits of the CMA's show that we have a robust structure and we are seeing progress.

At the top we have Australian Government and the NSW Government policy and regulatory frame for natural resource management. The State Plan has natural resource targets which are to maintain and improve the condition of 13 key assets, from our rivers and lakes, through our biodiversity. The issue for the CMA, the local government and community is to try and pull all that together into an integrated plan, which we call a CAP. It is that CAP that then should inform the local government planning, and the Local Environment Plan (LEP). In NSW we have Local Environment Plans (LEPs) but there is not much environment in them. Apart from the name a Local Environment Plan (LEP) should be spatially explicit as to where the natural resources and environmental assets are and specify protection.

The environmental assets that these communities cherish and need to sustain themselves in the long-term need to be identified and then linked in to a regional scale. That is the frame work that I see emerging from the reform process commenced by the Carr Government. I think it is worthy of working hard at to see if we can make it work better and better.

Integrated natural resource management

The aim is to integrate NRM (natural resource management) within the region, managing the water, the biodiversity, the land and the community values together. It is a huge challenge but it is a new concept that appears to be creating positive outcomes.
Let us look at the challenge we have at the moment of aligning catchment, land use and water planning systems.

A set of complex institutional arrangements has evolved in NSW, which in turn creates a complex set of often overlapping plans that all have a bearing on the health of our landscapes.

The scope of these plans varies from:

- regulating land use change (e.g. local environment plans), to
- managing the allocation of natural resources (e.g. water sharing plans), to
- guiding investment in land management and protection (e.g. catchment plans), to
- managing threats to landscapes (e.g. threat abatement plans).

Experience tells us that tackling these issues separately and sequentially, and dealing with them in science and policy silos, does not work - it is wasteful and creates more problems than it solves. We need a more integrated approach to dealing with these issues. And not just across issues, but also across the spatial spectrum—from rural to peri-urban to urban to coastal landscapes.

There are opportunities to bring about greater alignment between catchment planning, water planning and land use planning, to create a more holistic approach to building resilient landscapes. These opportunities are recognised by many stakeholders, and are also nominated as priorities in the State Plan and the National Water Initiative.

Integrating catchment planning with regional land use planning is a priority action of the NSW Government as outlined in the 2006 State Plan. While there has been progress in this area, more can be done at a strategic and operational level to incorporate best available knowledge and community values, reduce duplication of effort and streamline planning and investment While there is some overlap between the aims and activities of the NSW land use planning and NRM systems, and while the planning system has recently moved towards a more regional approach, one of the main shortcomings of current arrangements is the continued lack of alignment between the two systems.

In addition, the National Water Initiative prioritises the integration of water planning and catchment planning. CAPs, which set priorities for management for the whole landscape, have limited influence over the decisions made about water quantity and were developed after many of the asset-based plans such as floodplain management plans and estuary management plans. Conversely, water sharing plans have little influence over surrounding land use and the impacts of land use on the quality of the environmental flows provided by the plans. Both water resources and land resources should be managed with a common aim to improve overall landscape health.

As climate change exacerbates concerns about the coastal environment, food, energy and water security, this is likely to lead to greater conflicts over land and resource use.

Regional model for natural resource management

Let's return to the Regional and Local Government planning and delivery model. It is interesting to note that the Nobel Prize for Economics this week was awarded to Dr Elinor Ostram. Her work provides a theoretical basis for the NSW reforms to establish regional bodies which seek to interface community and government in the management of natural resources and the environment. Over arching all is the State and Commonwealth government which provide the policy frame, the legislation and the technical experts that inform and support the regional bodies and local government. The fact that the NSW government has supported this model by allocating base funding of nearly $40 million, plus the Australian Government's support, gives this program of regional planning and decision making a reasonable chance of success. It is still early days but it is part of deciding if this is the way to have a civil society that looks after its natural resources through an interface body between community, and all the groups within that community, and government. I think it has a lot of potential and our ongoing audit examination of performance so far, suggests that it is a progressive way to go.

I think that the Catchment Action Plans should be prospectuses that set out for government, private and investment interests the best way to look after the natural resources and environment that underpin our wellbeing as a community. It is a guide to the best actions to deliver integrated natural resource management.

Future institutional arrangements must have:

- A body which sets the higher levels targets and goals.
- Institutions responsible for delivery of those targets. These must have a clear set of strategic actions plans linked to statutory planning legislation which identifies and protects the NRM and environmental assets. There must be local and regional community engagement and responsibility for action on the ground.
- An independent and transparent monitoring of condition which generates a set of measures and a set of environmental accounts.
- An independent audit body which can audit and examine the monitoring data and set of accounts to assemble a progress report against the agreed targets.

In NSW we have in a small way begun a new journey however I doubt if it is yet well or widely understood.

The complex problems we are facing cannot be solved by isolated and simple solutions. We need to work together as professionals, we need to work across sectors, we need to work with all of society's interests.

We need to develop a culture of transparent, robust and long-term decision making that considers the diversity of values we have, the diversity of ecosystems we have, the diversity of challenges we face. We need a resilient society, a resilient landscape, and a resilient decision making culture.

Our landscapes are our future. The decisions we make today determine our future. Let it be a resilient future. Let us chose it – let it be the future we want rather than the one we end up with, the legacy of generations of short-term decisions.

We are here to launch a book that informs this debate; that guides our thinking; that advises us on how to be intelligent future-thinking decision makers. It provides us with the context for decision making – values, structures, processes and so on – as well as guidance, advice and decision making tools and relevant case-studies for us to learn from.

I commend this book to you and look forward to the panel discussion.

Thank you.