



Chair's Report

June 2009

SEVENTH EDITION: MANAGING NATURAL DISASTERS IN QUEENSLAND

Queensland's regional natural resource management groups have played an important role in recent years, supporting communities through a range of natural disasters, and leading communities through the environmental recovery process. Queensland's regional natural resource management groups are crucial to the essential work of preparing our environment and our communities to better withstand future natural disasters.

Queensland has long had a reputation for weather extremes, with droughts, floods and cyclones regularly impacting our economy, our lifestyles and our environment. Rebuilding our towns, infrastructure and local industries has always been a part of life. However, as we come to understand some of the trends of our changing climate, we must now come to terms with increased extremes, and more frequent natural disasters. We must prepare our economy and lifestyles to withstand and adapt to these climate changes - but what of our environment?

These last three years, in particular, have seen regional natural resource management groups across Queensland step beyond regular and ongoing environmental rehabilitation and agricultural sustainability projects, taking up crucial roles in environmental clean-up and recovery after Cyclone Larry,

and, more recently, the oil spill off the Sunshine Coast and flooding in the Gulf. For the first time, we are seeing widespread recognition of three important issues:

- our natural landscape is an integral part of our State's economy;
- our natural landscape is no longer resilient enough to withstand our State's natural disasters on its own; and
- the environment needs to become a larger focus of natural disaster recovery efforts.

The damage rendered by Cyclone Larry three years ago showed the northern and central coastal communities of Queensland how frail our fragmented rainforests have become. The damage wiped out swathes of cassowary habitat, and left smaller remnants to the mercy of weed infestation. Regional natural resource management groups, with the assistance of other community organisations, have driven recovery and rehabilitation efforts in the area ever since. However, long-term investment is required to help prepare these fragmented systems to better withstand future cyclones, reducing the need for investment in recovery down the track.

The same has been seen with the more recent floods in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Northern Gulf

Resource Management Group has worked hard to keep environmental recovery high on the local authorities' agendas, to rehabilitate the savannah grasslands, which, in their turn, play an important role in the local economy, as well as the local ecosystems. The displacement of so much topsoil during the floods could be reduced with long-term environmental and agricultural sustainability efforts, making the savannah landscape more resilient to future flooding events.

The last few years have seen, for the first time, a more widespread community concern for the environmental impact of natural disasters. It will become increasingly important to help prepare our environmental assets, and protect them from further damage - and Queensland's regional natural resource management groups are in the best position to lead this work.



MIKE BERWICK, CHAIR,
QUEENSLAND REGIONAL
NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
GROUPS' COLLECTIVE

Northern Gulf communities band together for flood recovery

Early this year, the Gulf of Carpentaria experienced severe flooding, causing significant damage to the tropical savannah environments, as well as to infrastructure, local industries and community morale. An active monsoon trough and several low pressure systems continuously flooded some areas of the Gulf for over 12 weeks. Millions of hectares were inundated, with some 90% of the savannah landscape lost or damaged, in some areas.

As a part of the local community, Northern Gulf Resource Management Group (NGRMG) leapt into action, supporting the Local Disaster Management Group, Queensland Emergency Services and the Etheridge Shire Council with mapping and GIS services, and hands-on relief support, including food and fuel resupply.



Stock had to swim to higher ground. Recovery efforts with landholders are still ongoing, rescuing stock, infrastructure and the region's natural resources. Photo courtesy of NGRMG.

John Bethel, Chair of NGRMG, worked with NGRMG staff to provide a support and information network to locals, government and the media, in particular, working with landholders, Agforce and the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management to coordinate all possible assistance. A blog site was established for locals to stay informed of the event and the assistance available



Einasleigh River, and what's left of the bridge. Repairing and upgrading this bridge to withstand future flood events is top of the list for the region's recovery plan. Photo courtesy of NGRMG.



Flood waters inundated the Gulf of Carpentaria, cutting off many towns and properties. Photo courtesy of NGRMG.

through various government agencies, and John's work with state and national media was successful in raising awareness of the floods throughout Australia.

"The impacts are so far reaching, and so long term," said John. "Obviously, the floods have battered towns and landholders, causing damage which we're slowly tallying up. But there will also be long term environmental impacts, including, for example, on the savannah seed banks, which are much harder to measure."

NGRMG General Manager, Noeline Gross said, "Events such as these cause such far reaching landscape changes, displacing topsoil and seed banks over vast areas, and possibly changing the region's vegetation for years to come.

"The impacts we've seen include total loss of grass cover (from three tonnes per hectare of grass to none), putrid waters with significant fish kills – and even crocodile deaths – and perished understory biodiversity, including complete termite colonies. Severe tree thickening and weed seed dispersal is also occurring, accentuated by lack of competition from a grassy layer, and we expect total loss of some species of perennial grass and potentially other biota.

"Finally, industry downturn is expected to be in the order of 70-80% for some properties over a period of three to four years.

"Only consecutive good wet seasons and careful environmental recovery will repair the legacy left by the 2009 Gulf floods," Noeline said.

Noeline has since worked with local councils and the Gulf Savannah Development Organisation to draft a flood recovery plan, outlining goals to help achieve community, environmental, infrastructure and economic recovery.

"In a remote area like the Gulf, people and organisations need to work cooperatively with all governments for the betterment of our future in the region. The NGRMG will continue to assist the region over the years to re-build and regain the healthy environment and growing economies that existed prior to this extreme flood event."

Volunteers needed: oil spill clean-up on target

Seven kilometres off the coast of Queensland on Wednesday, March 11, 2009, the Pacific Adventurer was battered by the tail end of Cyclone Hamish. Suffering two punctures to the hull, the vessel leaked around 270 tonnes of heavy fuel oil, and five hours later the oil was washing ashore on Moreton Island and some of the beaches on the Sunshine Coast.

It has been referred to as one of Australia's worst oil spills and prompted a huge clean-up operation involving Maritime Safety Queensland, the Department of Environment and Resource Management, and SEQ Catchments.

Clive Cook, Department of Environment and Resource Management's Senior Director – Conservation, Strategy and Planning, said "The clean up, supervised by Maritime Safety Queensland has restored the bulk of our beaches and shorelines to their pristine condition – but there is still a substantial amount of recovery work to be done – and that's where the volunteers will be needed."

Heavy machinery has been operating on Moreton Island and on other beaches since the spill, along with hundreds of council staff and contractors. Now that their effort has wound down, volunteers will step



Inspecting the beaches of Moreton Island as the work of the various groups involved in the clean-up draws to a close. Photo courtesy of SEQ Catchments.

in to continue the reparation work, replanting areas, restoring vegetation, removing small oil patches and monitoring wildlife returning to the area.

SEQ Catchments CEO, Simon Warner, said "The moment the spill hit the news, we received dozens of calls from people wanting to help – general public as well as coast care and conservation groups - and we have remained in contact with them, ready for the time when they are needed.

"Now that the clean-up is moving to the recovery stage, those volunteers are needed more than ever."

SEQ Catchments has opened the first round of funding for individuals, community groups and local councils to apply for funding to carry out the work. Expressions of Interest have already been received from a number of groups and will be reviewed by a panel.

The second round, calling for further Expressions of Interest, is expected to be run later this year.

The Expression of Interest forms, and details of work, are available on the SEQ Catchments website at www.seqcatchments.com.au.



Volunteers are now needed as the clean-up moves into the recovery stage.



Above top and bottom. The spill prompted a huge clean-up operation. Photos courtesy of SEQ Catchments.

Reflecting on disaster recovery – Terrain NRM and Cyclone Larry

Terrain NRM, the regional body for the Wet Tropics region of Queensland, has marked three years since Cyclone Larry decimated much of the central and northern Queensland coast with a reflection on the response effort.

Terrain CEO, Allan Dale, was appointed to the Operation Recovery Industry Action Taskforce, and said of the group's involvement in the recovery process, "Our participation in taskforces and other teams made sure that NRM issues were considered and represented in plans for industry and infrastructure recovery, which was very important."

"As a part of this participation, Terrain also provided direct support



Banana crops were completely wiped out, decimating the local agricultural industries. Photo courtesy of Terrain NRM.

to industry sectors in developing their Industry Action Plans, and worked with Conservation Volunteers Australia to coordinate urgent clean-up and rehabilitation activities for landholders in the region. This was a critical contribution during a time when the clean-up support of other organisations and government departments was not yet in place."

"Terrain also employed a response coordinator for six months to manage the development and implementation of post-cyclone investments and initiatives, develop post-cyclone response policy options and assess the impact of the cyclone on our delivery programs," said Allan.

Since the immediate recovery response, Terrain has also supported a range of activities to help the Wet Tropics get back on its feet, including fundraising and funding efforts with Landcare Australia and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal/ Australian Dairy Farmers.

"Terrain was subsequently contracted to deliver these funds to priority activities in the region, including on-farm recovery, targeted revegetation works on priority waterways and wildlife corridors, supporting Traditional Owners to recover cultural sites, and



Rainforest near Mission Beach, damaged during the cyclone. Photo courtesy of Terrain NRM.

an environmental impacts workshop for educators."

The team at Terrain also provided on-ground support and coordination for the Backyard Blitz program, which, in partnership with Landcare Australia, 'blitzed' the much damaged grounds of the Innisfail State High School.

"We also hosted a community forum in 2006, which has since resulted in the establishment of a cross-sector committee, which will have direct access to, and influence on, any future disaster management response arrangements," said Allan. "This committee will ensure an effective response to the needs of the environment after a disaster, and will also provide regular technical and policy advice to the District Disaster Management Group. Terrain is currently seeking resources to operate this important mechanism."

To find out more about natural resource management projects or contact details for your regional natural resource management group, visit the Queensland Regional NRM Groups Collective website - www.rgc.org.au - or ph 07 4699 5000.

Supported by

