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The Australian Rangeland Society

Keeping people and communities at the centre of NRM in the SA Arid Lands

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Abstract

The South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resources Management Region spans over 50% of SA with approximately 10 000 people (2% of the SA population) sparsely occupying over 500 000 square kilometres. Critical industries and globally iconic landscapes characterise the region with remote and isolated communities sparsely positioned, each of which are in the view of the SA Arid Lands NRM Board, critical to the conversations on managing the Arid Lands landscapes, lifestyles and livelihoods. Pastoralism, Tourism, Mining and Exploration contribute significantly to state and national economies.

In considering how people and communities would remain central to the influence the SA Arid Lands NRM Board seeks to have, IT has invested in a model that acknowledges the challenges of funding and time limitations and the tyranny of distance balanced with the critical need to value and include its community in every way possible to encourage participation in NRM.

A team of multi-disciplinary Community Engagement Officers, within the Partnerships and Community Engagement (PACE) Team each take responsibility for one of 6 NRM districts within the region and in doing so, play a key role as a conduit between the Board, program managers and the community. Supporting community in NRM extension, school and education programs, community events, Aboriginal partnerships, the leadership of district NRM groups, grant programs, action planning, cross regional collaboration and volunteering form the core business of the PACE team .

Placing people at the centre, and deciding, designing and delivering on NRM priorities, projects and plans together, grows the NRM community and develops community capacity. This enhanced community capacity will far outlive the political and financial cycles that often lead to a model of 'reinventing wheels' in regional service delivery and capacity building and stop-start successes in community endeavour.

Investment in community development, education and self-governance whereby communities see themselves more prominently involved in local decision making and influence needs to remain foundational to regional and outback investment, thereby 'future proofing' regions that will inevitably face change and transition, whether intentionally imposed or as a result of the boom bust cycle of the rangelands.

The SA Arid Lands

The South Australian Arid Lands (SAAL) are characteristically similar to many other rangelands environments Australia wide. Plenty of space, relatively few people and some of the most pristine natural wonders and wealth creating resources, highlighting tensions between resource development and utilisation with the need to ensure these resources that sustain us, are responsibly and sustainably managed.

Sheep and cattle production, mining and exploration and the tourism industry encompassing nature based, cultural and geo-tourism support the economic sustainability of the region. The beneficiaries of these industries extend far beyond the region with much of the drive for the region being led through support industries based in capital cities and even abroad.

The life giving Great Artesian Basin and Lake Eyre Basin situated in the SA Arid Lands are fed by many river and catchment systems. The region contributes significantly to several state, national and global economies. Twenty per cent of the region consists of national parks and reserves and 5 of these are co-managed with the Aboriginal owners of their country.

Change – we can't live with it – we can't live without it.....

The only constant in the SA Arid Lands is *change*. Political cycles change at every level leading to variances in policy drivers and government investment. Often the political drivers at a state level are at odds with those at a national level. Climate change continues to make the boom-bust cycle of living on the land more extreme with every season. Economic drivers, commodity prices, political decisions that relate to water, export, access and major infrastructure can challenge the region socially, economically and environmentally. Remaining resilient to all of this takes some doing.

Community by and large remains the same - by name and by nature, as a collective of people who share a common interest and unite in the advent of change. The people, their stories, histories, expertise, spirit, are variable, but absolute. Political and funding cycles will come and go as will the services and projects they generate. The communities will remain while the investment made into natural resource management essentially positions the local community to ensure that with every change impacting a region there remains some semblance of stability, continuity and ideally, growing resilience.

One of the inherent challenges in SAAL is the tyranny of distance. The sense of community that generates common endeavour and shared commitment is challenged by the distances between districts and even neighbouring properties. This can partially be addressed with new technology which for many fortunate enough to have connectivity, creates a virtual connection second only to real face to face engagement. While technological tools and mediums are important and provide real time connection contributing to global citizenship and a sense of connection, technological mediums only go some way to community building and are tactics intended to become the basis of further, more meaningful engagement.

The tools.....

South Australian public policy is built upon the principles of working Better Together¹ and Reforming Democracy². These principled resources ensure that decision making, problem solving or working with community utilise a spectrum of participation developed by the International Association of Public Participation³ (IAP2). (Figure 1). It results in a more deliberative and participative approach to working with community and as such, demonstrates an explicit commitment to community – in this instance by the SA Arid Lands NRM Board, seeking to connect with a promise of intent that goes some way to strengthen the trust between board and the communities it seeks to partner with. The Board seeks to partner with other government and non-government agencies, most of which espouse similar values to the Better Together principles given it is embedded in SA Public Sector Policy.

By applying this approach in the first instance, the SAAL NRM Board has identified why and to what extent they will engage with community. The spectrum of participation has global application which is placing communities in the centre of decisions that immediately influence them.

In the SA Arid Lands, the Board has been effective at communicating (inform and consult). This sits at the far left end of the spectrum and is a consistent mechanism to update communities of the Board's business. The very real risk faced with working with community is what may result in "consultation fatigue". So too the continuous cycle of 'questioning' communities through consultative methods, can tire a community and disengage them from a wider conversation that they may hold influence within. These are the least expensive and the most easily quantified means of connecting with community, however do not provide the qualitative measures that really discern whether there has been a change or an impact as a result of a meaningful level of engagement that extends beyond the engagement itself. Inform and consult have their place, are more economical and efficient, yet must be well considered in the suite of engagement aspirations so there are some outcomes that result less on achieving a milestone and more on influencing and developing a legacy of engagement that transcends an issue, topic or challenge – at a given moment in time. The focus must be on developing the goodwill that leaves the door open to future collaborative endeavour.

¹ Better Together - <https://yoursay.sa.gov.au/better-together>

² Reforming Democracy - <https://yoursay.sa.gov.au/reforming-democracy>

³ IAP2 - https://www.iap2.org.au/Tenant/C0000004/00000001/files/IAP2_Public_Participation_Spectrum.pdf

IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM



The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

		INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 				
		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
	PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Figure 1. © IAP2 International Federation 2014. All rights reserved.

It's all about relationships.....

In SA Arid Lands, the NRM Board is comprised of 10 people who represent a number of disciplines, skill sets and constituents and alone have a task to have real reach, influence or profile within the region. Challenges exist in meaningfully engaging a community in decision making, and influencing and investing according to local needs and aspirations alongside the other parameters the Board must work within (legislation, funders, policy). The SAAL region has 6 district NRM Groups, each consisting of 6-8 members, also representing a more local community snapshot. These groups act as a conduit between the board and the community. The Board in turn has a direct link with the Minister for the Environment, and so too do the community through the extension relationships that exist through the NRM Group model. To serve this model, the board have a team of officers who have a multi-disciplinary focus to their respective district, an enviro-social sub-region that aligns naturally occurring and constructed communities. This approach ensures that the Board has a relationship with the community that provides the basis for a greater level of reciprocity, influence in both directions and an open channel for engagement where the region's needs can continue to be positioned foremost on the agendas of governments, industry partners and peak advocacy bodies.

The model described here aligns with the centre-right level of the IAP2 spectrum of participation in 'collaborate'. The ultimate endeavour with the service and support extended to the NRM Group model is to move the functionality to a level of 'empower'. This position on the spectrum sees a level of self-determination and capacity that exists at a community level with capacity that means the group are less dependent on external governance support. The Board extends the opportunities for similar levels of autonomy and self-determination through the offer of community grants and the like for design, development and delivery to generate influence to the greatest extent possible at a local community level.

The SAAL community engagement officers engage more broadly than the NRM Group model including with Aboriginal communities/corporate bodies, volunteer groups, schools, progress associations, environmental NGOs, industry and business, community more broadly as well as in NRM extension with landholders. The relationships formed through this regular, face to face, both responsive and proactive approach ultimately avails the Board to real time issues, ideas and opportunities to ensure they are continually tuned into local needs of each district. The local and ground up information can be applied to a systems thinking approach to planning and prioritising for

investment in NRM – keeping community engaged along the way rather than dropping in and out at times where there is something to offer, or something the Board needs.

The cost of genuinely partnering with community is rewarded with the results that are becoming increasingly evident through a personal and dependable relationship that communities have with their local NRM group through dedicated resources that facilitate connection and ensure the community is heard. Communities have a hand in the design of events, the leverage of investment into their communities, access to broader networks and affiliations, events and development on a broader scale. They are running their own events, planning and influencing how the Board is investing back into the region. Communities are turning up, engaging and influencing as can be demonstrated in the 10 year Strategic Plan 2017-2027⁴. The NRM Plan – *It's Your Place* makes a commitment to continue partnering with community and what form this will take after inclusion of community values framed the development of the plan.

In Closing.....

This approach extends beyond social media, emails and publications, that while vital in the process of keeping a community up to date, 'informing' alone does not provide the immediate mechanism for community to influence at all levels and directions in the same way as do ongoing relationships. The investment in an engagement strategy that is based on the foundation of relationships pays dividends and grows genuine partnerships with community that ultimately lead to more enduring outcomes at a local level.

Community will remain long after all else changes and shall remain the stewards of our landscapes, lifestyles and livelihoods, outliving the cycles that come and go. The decision to nurture and grow their expectations to be involved to the extent they can be, in the design of processes and programs that lead to longevity beyond the inevitably short lived political, investment and economic cycles will help them to realise the ultimate sustainability of their communities.

⁴ It's Your Place - <http://www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/aridlands/about-us/our-regions-plan>