

New regionalism and nature conservation: Lessons from South East Queensland, Australia

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Abstract

New regionalism emerged in the 1990s in response to the impacts of globalization and metropolitan growth. It represents an amalgam of concepts related to regional planning and its key characteristics include: a focus on specific geographic regions and place making; an active approach based on improved governance arrangements; the adoption of more holistic and integrated frameworks that incorporate environmental concerns; inclusion of normative approaches; acknowledgement of the importance of regional design and physical planning. We present a critical analysis of new regionalism at the micro-regional level (10,000 km²) in relation to nature conservation in South East Queensland, Australia. Several important gaps between the rhetoric and reality of new regionalism in this region were identified. Key lessons drawn from our analysis include the need to: link biodiversity assessment processes with implementation processes and to collaborate fully with all stakeholders; mainstream outcomes into complementary planning processes; ensure holistic and integrated approaches that incorporate adaptive management; utilize a range of knowledge frameworks; adaptively monitor and manage to ensure the adoption of the most effective mix of planning mechanisms to achieve regional nature conservation goals.

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1. Introduction

Regional planning is experiencing a resurgence in Europe, the Americas and the Asia-Pacific (Brenner, 2002; Söderbaum and Shaw, 2003; Wolfe, 2003; McGrath-Champ, 2005), with city-regions such as Milan-Lombardy, Barcelona-Catalonia, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka leading the way. Wallis (2006) believes we are witnessing the rapid emergence of a global system of regions. However, regional planning is not a new concept, Wheeler (2002) having described five broad eras. These included: ecological regionalism in the early 20th century (e.g., Geddes, 1915/1949; Mumford, 1925); regional science in the late 1940s (e.g., Friedmann and Alonso, 1964; Isard, 1975); Marxist regionalism of the late 1960s (e.g., Harvey, 1973; Castells, 1977); public choice regionalism during the 1960s; and the current era of new regionalism (e.g., Storper,

1995; Keating, 1998; Amin, 1999; Lovering, 1999; Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000; MacLeod, 2001), which emerged in the 1990s in response to the impacts of globalization and metropolitan growth (e.g., suburban sprawl, traffic congestion, loss of biodiversity, declining quality of life, and growing social and equity issues).

While key concepts related to new regionalism continue to be debated (Lovering, 1999, 2001; Wheeler, 2002), the focus to date has been on approaches emphasizing economic drivers and growth management (Storper, 1995, 1997; Dredge, 2005; Rannie and Grobbelaar, 2005), with lesser concern for social capital and democracy (Scott, 1996, 1998; Putman, 1993; Hirst, 1997; Smyth et al., 2004), territorial government (Harvie, 1994; Harding et al., 1996; Keating, 1997, 1998) and political issues (Paasi, 1991; Keating, 1998; Amin, 1999; Deas and Ward, 2000; MacLeod, 2001) within regions. Within these conceptual differences there has been a growing interest in regional environmental sustainability (Thackway and Cresswell, 1995; Sattler and Williams, 1999; Shaw, 2000) as new regionalism espouses the need to integrate environmental, economic and social concerns to achieve more sustainable regional outcomes.

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However, in practice, the outcomes of new regionalism indicate that it continues to privilege economic growth over environmental concerns, especially biodiversity conservation (Chatterton, 2002).

The majority of studies of regionalism have been concerned with macro-regions (world regions) such as the European Union (Tomaney and Ward, 2000; Haughton and Counsell, 2004), the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Harvie and Lee, 2002; Chandra, 2004) and Southern African Development Community (Shaw, 2000). However, Söderbaum (2003) and Dredge (2005) call for the study of regionalism at meso (i.e., national and state) and micro (i.e., within a state) scales.

South East Queensland (SEQ or “the Region”) (Fig. 1) is a suitable case study to critically analyse new regionalism as played out at the micro-regional level. It has an area of about 2.25 million ha, stretches 250 km from north to south and 100 km from east to west and includes the cities of Brisbane, Toowoomba and the Gold Coast. It consists of 18 local governments organised into four sub-regional groups and is the fastest growing region in Australia, with a total population projected to grow to between 3.5 and 4 million people by 2026 (OUM, 2005). Around 22% of Australia’s total population growth in 2000 occurred in SEQ (EPA, 2003).

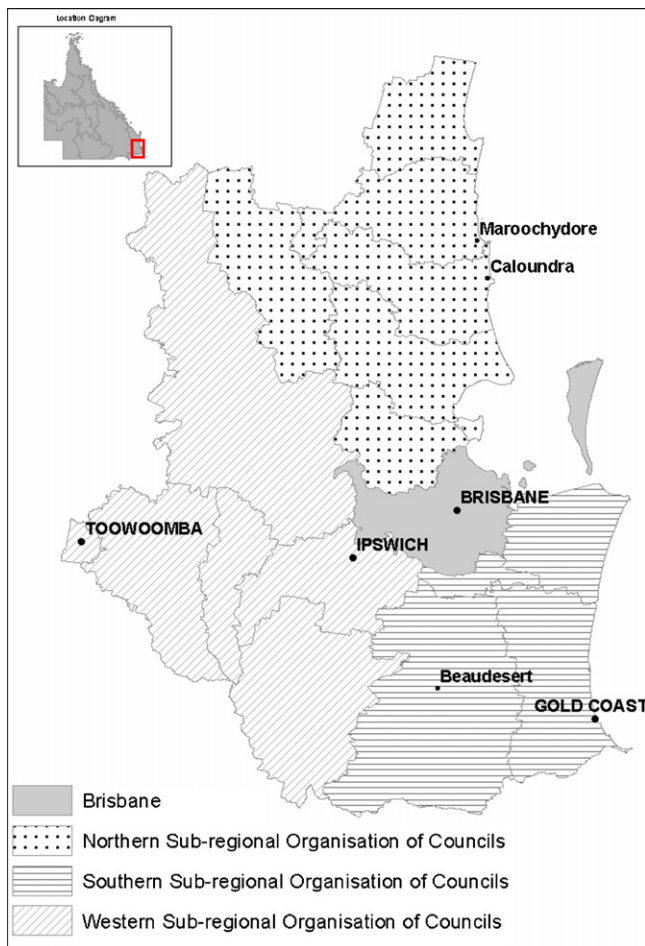


Fig. 1. The South East Queensland region, four sub-regional planning areas, local government areas and major urban centres.

The Region’s urban structure is polycentric with growth focused on Brisbane (the State’s capital), the Gold Coast and several other smaller coastal settlements (e.g., Caloundra and Maroochydore) and extending inland to include the cities of Ipswich and Toowoomba (Fig. 1). A 200 km city extending along the eastern seaboard has been mooted as a possible outcome of continued, unplanned regional growth (Spearritt, 2002; Brisbane Institute, 2005).

As well as being Australia’s most rapidly growing region, SEQ is also one of the nation’s most biologically diverse (Young and Dillewaard, 1999; EPA, 2003). However, the lack of effective conservation planning and the Region’s focus on economic development has resulted in sprawling urban and rural residential areas and the loss of biodiversity, especially in areas of high development pressure on the more gently sloping coastal lowlands (Catterall and Kingston, 1993; Catterall et al., 1996, 1997). The conservation reserve system, like most others in the world (Pressey, 1994), also does not effectively represent or protect the biodiversity within the Region (McAlpine et al., 2005; McAlpine et al., 2007).

A range of regional planning approaches have been implemented since the 1980s to achieve more sustainable outcomes in the face of very rapid population growth. These approaches have been a response to the absence of statutory planning controls, the inconsistent approaches to planning within the Region and the lack of any coordinated arrangements between the tiers of government to manage unsustainable growth (Regional Coordination Committee [RCC], 2000).

While some aspects of new regionalism are evident in SEQ, there are significant gaps between the rhetoric and the on-ground outcomes for nature conservation. A contributing factor is the governance arrangements and the failure to fully mainstream key biodiversity principles within the regional and local planning context. Against this background, this paper presents a critical analysis of new regionalism in SEQ. The focus is on how effectively nature conservation issues have been integrated into the regional planning processes. We begin by briefly describing the key characteristics of new regionalism and then apply these to evaluate several regional nature conservation planning approaches in SEQ. We conclude with the key lessons as to how new regionalism may be advanced at the micro-regional scale. These insights provide direction to regional planners, particularly in relation to institutional and policy innovations to improve regional nature conservation outcomes.

2. Key characteristics of new regionalism and their application to South East Queensland

New regionalism, in essence, represents the evolution of regionalism away from state-centred approaches towards the establishment of a new kind of region where management institutions cooperate on matters such as economic growth, regional competitiveness, environmental issues, and building networks (Wallis, 2006). This approach recognizes that the conventional policies of governments have been inadequate in dealing with many of the challenges of sustainable development and that there

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