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'Raising the bar': The role of institutional frameworks for community engagement in Australian natural resource governance



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ABSTRACT

Australian natural resource governance has recently embarked on a new round of regional experimentation. One decade after regional natural resource management bodies were established in response to ideals of *devolution* and *subsidiarity*, political commitments to 'localism' have resulted in a paradoxical shift to bigger regional boundaries, and an apparent retreat from values of environmental conservation. A retreat from government funded public good natural resource management has seen a growth in ideals of market instruments and an economic paradigm of productivity and profit begin to dominate. A long held divide between conservation and production landscape values has seen community engagement emerge as the battleground of rural environmental policy.

Through two qualitative case studies of community governance mechanisms this paper examines how one Australian jurisdiction has responded to these challenges. Findings include a valuable role for best practice standards and compliance requirement in driving new norms of community engagement; a difficult balance between accountability and innovation in implementing community governance; and significant disruption caused by regular cycles of reform. Recommendations include developing community skills for participatory governance and the development of negotiated accountability frameworks that support rural governance innovation.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, government investment in natural resource management (NRM) is receding. National programs supporting conservation and environmental management on private and public lands are under review in a context of budget efficiencies and growing government emphasis on market based strategies (Australian Government, 2014). Conflict over rural land use has seen tensions arise between government, community and private industry (Barbour, 2014; Woods, 2014; Guilliat, 2014). Attempts to manage shared natural resources across jurisdictional boundaries have been challenged by politicisation and polarisation (Gray, 2011; Hussey and Dovers, 2007), reducing the ability of government to deliver equitable and sustainable natural resource management (National Water Commission, 2013; Rawlins et al., 2014; Keogh, 2014).

This paper considers how institutional rules, organizational structures and policy settings shape community engagement in

natural resource decision-making (Howard, 2015b; Dovers, 2010). While previous research has explored methods of evaluating participatory processes (Rowe and Frewer, 2004; McKinney and Field, 2008; Ford-Thompson et al., 2012), there has been limited attention to how institutional factors influence the effectiveness of these processes (Prager et al., 2015). As part of a larger program concerned with improving the design of natural resource governance,¹ this paper aims to develop policy recommendations that might inform development of institutional frameworks for community engagement in rural natural resource governance (Gross, 2008; Black, 1997; Bryner, 2002).

This paper briefly outlines the current context for natural resource governance and community engagement in one

¹ The 'Next Generation Rural Landscape Governance' research program focused on proposing the next generation of integrated natural resource management laws and institutions. The program involved collaborators in Australia, USA, Iceland and Asia, and was supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant. Core research themes included: Institutional Governance; Co-regulation; Over-arching Legal Architecture; Effective Engagement; Behaviourally Effective Rules; Risk Instruments; Transaction Costs.

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Australian jurisdiction through two case studies of rural land management planning. A series of reform recommendations are distilled from the qualitative analysis, and implications for rural policy and community engagement are considered. These recommendations attempt to move past a repetitive focus on how to run a good participatory process, to a better understanding of how these processes can contribute to building sustainable and resilient rural communities (Howard, 2015a).

2. Literature review

2.1. Community engagement

Community engagement has become a central philosophical plank of environmental governance (Boxelaar et al., 2006; Holley 2010; van Tol Smita, de Loëab, & Plummer, 2015). Decision-makers in the public policy arena increasingly describe an *engaged* community as key to the successful design and implementation of regulation and policy (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007; Brown 2007, Reed 2008, Walker 2011). Many unarticulated assumptions underpin this position, including that community engagement reliably translates into more acceptable decisions (Adams and Hess 2001) while also delivering better environmental outcomes (Ford-Thompson et al. 2012, Pattberg and Widerberg 2015). Grounded in the belief that communities of individuals can be meaningfully involved in determining the form and substance of decisions that affect them, 'community engagement' has become a common phrase for a wide range of participatory processes (Eversole 2011, Koontz and Thomas 2006)².

2.2. The Australian natural resource management context

Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world (World Health Organisation, 2015), with its relatively small national population concentrated along the coastal fringe and the majority of the landmass sparsely populated (Hugo et al., 2015). While requirements for community consultation appears in many existing legislative arrangements and organisational policies in Australia (Dellinger 2012, Lambropoulos, 2010), these rarely address the specific conditions faced in rural Australia, such as small populations, vast distances and a reduced pool of capable and available participants (Curtis et al., 2014; Martin, 2016).

Rural communities in Australia are facing pressures of demographic decline, increased corporatisation of agriculture and land use competition from extractive industries (Bartel, 2013; Taft, 2014). Rural communities express concern that the interests of the urbanised population increasingly dominate political decisions about Australia's natural resources (Brown, 2014; Keogh, 2014). Sites of natural resources conflicts are increasing, with serious implications for the social fabric of the communities involved (Guilliat, 2014). As a consequence, many rural communities are increasingly dissatisfied with government attempts to regulate the use of natural resources (Woods, 2014). Improving community engagement through better-designed and implemented participatory processes may help to improve natural resource governance in rural Australia (Cohen and McCarthy, 2015).

² Within this paper, the term *community engagement* is used as synonymous with *public participation*. This reflects an interaction between the Australian vernacular of public policy, and the international terminology of sustainable development (Bottrill and Cordonier Segger, 2005; International Association for Public Participation, 2012; La Camera, 2013). Both phrases carry an assumption that "environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level" (United Nations Environment Programme, 1992).

2.3. Exploring community engagement in rural natural resource governance

Natural resource *governance* describes the mechanisms developed through policy, legislation and everyday interactions to influence or enact decisions about how natural resources will be used (Ryan et al., 2010; Lockwood and Davidson, 2010). As population growth, consumption demands and climate change increase pressures on shared resources, there is an need for improved governance structures that balance vested interests with consideration of social and environmental impacts, and enable rural communities to be involved in making decisions about the management of natural resources (Taft, 2014; Bartel, 2013; Martin et al., 2012). If "*public participation is widely considered a fundamental aspect of good governance*" (Dellinger, 2012) then it is necessary to explore how governance structures attempt to bring community voices into natural resource decision-making (Holley, 2010; Herriman, 2011; Evans and Reid, 2014; Lister, 2002).

Institutional arrangements can exert an unseen influence on attempts to generate innovative policy responses, resulting in a disconnection between the stated objectives of policy initiatives and the way that these are operationalised (Prager et al., 2015; Robins and Kanowski, 2011). Research demonstrates that 'institutions can work to embrace, moderate or exacerbate uncertainty' (Mehta et al., 1999). Scholars and practitioners strive to understand how these dynamics influence community participation in natural resource governance (Cohen and McCarthy, 2015; Hordijk et al., 2014; Ortas et al., 2015). This interest in how decisions are made and whose voices are heard (Boyd et al., 2015; Cohen and McCarthy, 2015) is based on ideas of governance as incremental, mundane and co-created during implementation (Colebatch, 2009; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006) and suggests that designing successful reform requires attention to these existing patterns and their influence on participatory processes in practice (Parola, 2013; Taft, 2014).

3. Methodology

Case studies provide a lens for qualitative research that seeks to understand complex and messy real world experiences (Neuman, 2011; Yin, 2009). This research examined how legislated requirements for community engagement in natural resource management were translated into policy and practice (Feagin et al., 1991) through semi-structured interviews of community members, bureaucrats and legislators; reflective research practice; and document analysis. A post-positivist approach to the data was combined with narrative enquiry to uncover a story of research findings (Lal et al., 2012). Post-positivism accepts the influence of external subjectivities on not just the research subject but also the individuals involved in the research design and implementation (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). This addresses the tension between the constructivist nature of community engagement as it occurs in practice and institutional dynamics that are informed by positivist notions of objectivity (Boxelaar et al., 2006; Brackertz and Meredyth, 2009; Wallington and Lawrence, 2008).

3.1. Case study design

The case study design enabled comparison of two different community governance mechanisms that operated under the same institutional framework. Rather than look for 'exceptional' cases, selection focused on understanding how frameworks for community engagement operated in everyday examples to build knowledge about implementation dynamics (Woolgar and Neyland, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2001). Although the examples were at different

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