

Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

Practice Guide for resilient regions

Resource Sheet No 9 (RS 9)

A case for change

The *Practice Guide* 'Resilient Regions: A guide to social ecological planning' describes an alternative approach for managing natural resources. It sets out a process based on resilience thinking (RS 3), collective learning (RS 4) and adaptive governance (RS 5).

Current approaches to NRM are founded on questionable assumptions. These are: that issues are mostly understood by experts; cause and effect relationships are well known; and required actions are clear and will be successful. Issues are therefore considered predictable and controllable given sufficient resources. Top down management and optimised approaches will reliably deliver the best outcome over time.

While this approach may work in highly certain or controlled settings, it repeatedly fails in complex and dynamic settings such as socially, economically and biophysically complex regions. Different approaches are needed to better understand these dynamic social-ecological systems (SES) (RS 7) and our capacities to shape them into the future. Resilience based social-ecological planning offers one such way.

A wide audience

The *Practice Guide* is intended primarily for managers and planners in rural and regionally-focused NRM organisations. However, it is also relevant to anyone interested in addressing the sorts of challenging natural resource problems confronting communities everywhere. The content

A Practice Guide for social ecological planning

The *Practice Guide* is divided into 6 main sections:

1. **Preparation phase** setting up the process, gathering information, creating the right governance and culture to support the process
2. **Resilience of what?** outlines the process for defining and describing the 'focal' systems, particularly relevant scales, the governance arrangements, engagement with stakeholders and identification of their major concerns, documenting the values, goods, services and outputs of the system and sub-systems
3. **Resilience to what?** describes the analysis phase; data and information from the first two phases are analysed using the resilience framework for understanding dynamics
4. **So what?** focuses on synthesising information to inform the development of strategies and actions, reframing problems, determining type/degree of change required to achieve desired outcomes
5. **Now what?** focuses on turning strategy into action, setting up implementation processes to address the big issues identified in phase 3, while maximising learning and adaptation opportunities
6. **Adaptive implementation** approaches for designing implementation to address both problems and learning. It describes a basic conceptual approach to adaptive management, including an adaptive culture and includes the basic mechanics of translating knowledge into

has emerged from ongoing interactions between theory and practice. It is built on the experiences of NRM regional groups across Australia,

particularly those in NSW, whose planning approaches have been influenced by the leadership of the Natural Resources Commission.

The *Practice Guide* has been developed in response to demand from people confronted with 'wicked' problems; the type of complex multi-dimensional issues that resist simpler management approaches. In contrast to the effort and resources that generally go into developing regional NRM plans, managers and staff seldom use their strategic plans for decision-making while few landowners, community members and other stakeholders are familiar with their content. Many regions have now embraced a social ecological planning approach suggesting lots of other people agree that traditional NRM planning approaches no longer fit with regional situations.

What does the *Practice Guide* provide?

The emergent adaptive approach outlined in the *Practice Guide* is a major departure from the familiar traditional 'comprehensive, rational' NRM planning approaches. The processes provide strategic and operational guidance on future investment in NRM activities and in the capacity to adapt and learn from those activities. The outputs from these processes can be produced as traditional planning documents, although many organisations and communities are moving to online modularised documents to better communicate how they will address the challenges and the changes they wish to see.

Using this *Practice Guide*, and the concepts on which it is based, has been shown to increase the capacity of people and organisations to think differently about complex challenges in regional systems. Whether that 'different thinking' is used to develop plans, design projects, influence policy or simply increase the richness of our understanding and conversations, this guide makes a contribution to addressing these challenges.

A different planning approach

- questions current assumptions
- challenges you to think about governance
- creates new opportunities for engagement
- creates new knowledge and understanding about your systems
- creates new insights and ways of looking at NRM problems
- develops capacity for making different decisions about where and how to intervene in SES
- develops strategic and operational guidance for creating more resilient SESs
- creates the essential components for learning and adaptation
- is challenging, sometimes messy and it will sometimes fail.

Regional NRM experiences

Detailed evaluations of the process in NRM regions suggest that the approach is catalytic. Based on new insights, organisations have been able to narrow their focus to a core set of issues critical to the long-term function and sustainability of their regional communities and landscapes.

A wide range of less tangible benefits and outcomes have also been generated, including increased organisational and individual capacities, new relationships and partnerships, new engagement opportunities, new insights into the way regional SESs function and change, new governance and engagement processes, new information and evidence, new capacity, tools and approaches for adaptation. Many of these are building blocks for more substantial future change towards sustainable and resilient regional systems.

Further information

Partnership Study Resource Material:

www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation

Resilient Regions: A practice guide to social ecological planning

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