

State of the catchments 2010

Economic sustainability and social well-being

Southern Rivers region

State Plan target

Natural resource decisions contribute to improving or maintaining economic sustainability and social well-being (ESSW).

Background

This report focuses on links between changes in natural resource management (NRM) and ESSW which can be influenced by government. These changes are hard to measure, due to the complex interactions between the environment, society and individuals.

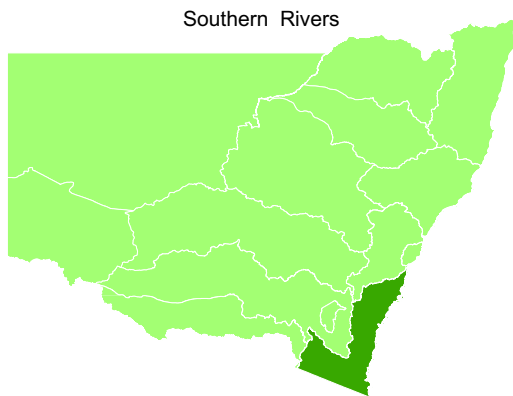
Understanding ESSW in the Southern Rivers region

Representatives of three key stakeholder groups – landholders, townspeople and people involved in NRM – were consulted via focus groups and interviews. Benchmarking studies, commissioned by the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (CMA) for landholders, Aboriginal people, CMA staff and stakeholder organisations on NRM issues in the Southern Rivers region, were reviewed. No overall assessment of the condition (strength and number) of the links between natural resource decisions and ESSW is given, as the distinctions between stakeholders' perceptions and experiences are significant. These differences are critical to understanding the likely contributions of natural resource decisions to ESSW in different parts of the community.

A detailed technical report describes the methods used to derive the information contained in this report. At the time of publication of the *State of the catchments (SOC) 2010* reports, the technical reports were being prepared for public release. When complete, they will be available on the I&I website: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/info/mer.

Note: All data on natural resource condition, pressures and management activity included in this SOC report, as well as the technical report, was collected up to January 2009.

Map of the catchment



Overview

What do people in this region see as important to maintaining community vitality?

Secure employment, especially close to home, was considered critical by all groups. Other important factors include:

- managing rapid development in coastal and peri-urban areas
- profitable and sustainable agriculture and recreational industries, eg skiing, fishing
- enhancing personal connections, social networks and community participation
- managing population change, eg younger people are leaving rural areas for education reasons and retirement havens have become busier.

What is the state of ESSW across the region?

ESSW is variable across the region. People are concerned about the rapid growth and development in the north-east of the region, leading to major environmental and community pressures. Other key aspects include:

- areas with high levels of retirees are seen as doing well
- some rural areas are struggling to maintain population, infrastructure and sufficient access to services
- employment opportunities are limited away from major centres.

Aboriginal interests – connections to culture

The well-being of Aboriginal communities, as well as their ability to access land and its natural resources, is entwined with the health of the environment. Limited access and its associated impacts on cultural practice have created a history of socio-economic disadvantage.

Studies demonstrate that participation by Aboriginal people in the Australian Government's 'Caring for our Country' initiative benefits both the environment and social cohesion. Meaningful NRM jobs provide many tangible, individual and family benefits as well as an increased sense of worth within Aboriginal communities.

Figure 1 shows that, over the past 10 years, the NSW indigenous population has grown at a faster rate than the total population. The indigenous population growth is around 3700 people per year; however, this number is considerably smaller than the total population increase of around 51,000 per year. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has suggested that the high level of indigenous population growth may be a result of both high natural growth and more people being prepared to identify their indigenous origins in the census.

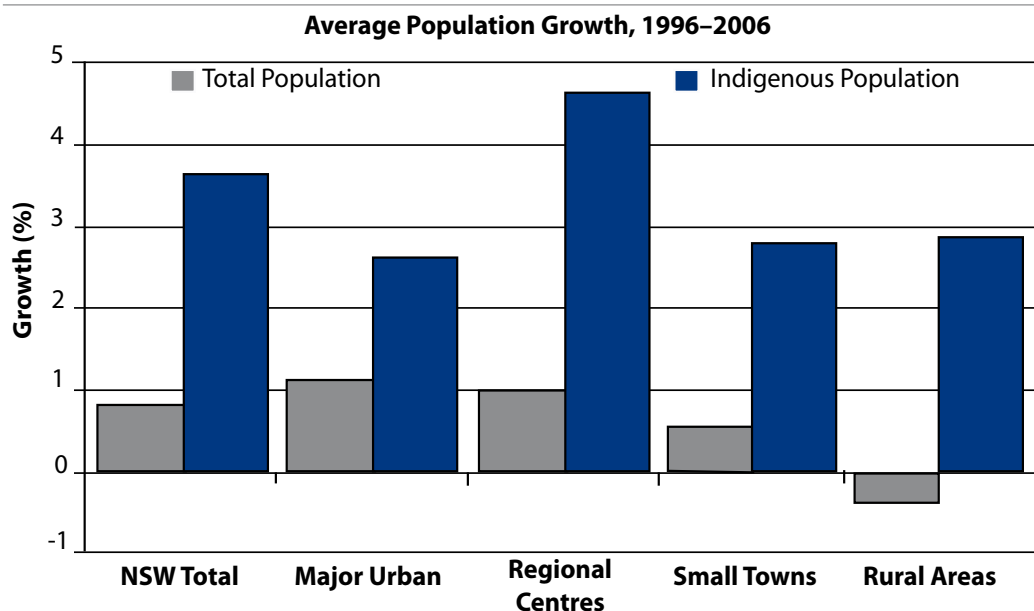


Figure 1 Growth of indigenous population compared with general population

Graph provided by Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS) from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, 2008

Trends – community views

Landscape changes

Changes to the landscape include:

- urban development of coastal centres, combined with peri-urban subdivision close to Sydney and Canberra, is reducing agricultural production and increasing weed and fire management complexity
- regeneration of trees on lifestyle blocks, land formerly used for grazing and the establishment of more national parks are encouraging greater wildlife numbers
- major localised impacts have been felt from commercial forestry projects on land previously used for agriculture
- grassy weeds and introduced pest animals are significant issues for landholders, although most landholders believe that the health of their property has improved over the past five years
- drought has continued to affect pasture condition and the establishment of plantations is affecting surface water runoff patterns.

Primary industry

Environmental impacts on the condition of farm production assets and regulatory changes are diminishing ESSW and motivation for farmers. However, NRM improvements are increasing the aesthetic appeal of some properties and providing a psychological benefit. Other issues include:

- reduced land in agricultural production and fewer large commercial producers, with an increase in lifestyle blocks and absentee owners
- declining profitability from the rising cost of farm inputs, low commodity prices and weeds increase workloads and impede landholders' capacity to practise improved NRM
- increased land prices due to proximity to major urban centres limits farm expansion; however, peri-urban subdivision also increases population and capacity in these areas
- fish restocking has benefited the recreational market for alpine fishing
- the reduced employment in agriculture – although employment in this sector declined by more than 10 per cent across NSW (1996–2006), it fell more significantly in the Southern Rivers region (Figure 2).

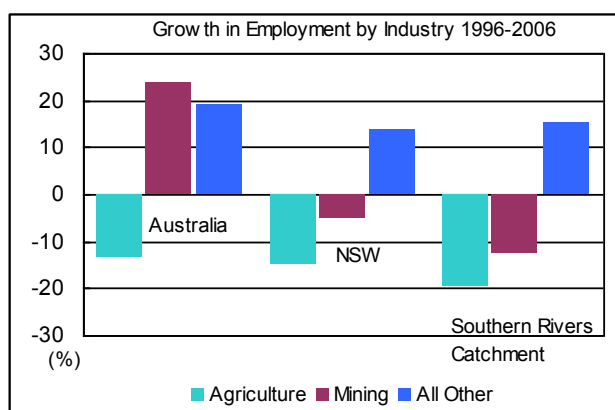


Figure 2 Decline in agriculture employment over 10 years

Graph provided by Industry & Investment NSW (I&I) from ABS data, 2008

Townscapes

Rapid urban and peri-urban development in coastal areas and areas close to Canberra is affecting ESSW in numerous ways, eg traffic increases and demands on infrastructure and services. Other key impacts include:

- land-use change – as awareness of social and environmental issues increases, major changes can encourage communities to take action
- many urban people in this region are involved in on-ground work, which provides significant social and individual benefits, eg exercise, increased skills and networks
- population decline in some rural areas in this region reduces the amount of community participation and the capacity for additional roles to be undertaken.

Table 1 provides a summary of comments made by the key stakeholder groups.

Table 1 ESSW check and group comments

Likely impact of NRM decisions on ESSW	Condition	Trend	Data confidence	Typical group comments
Business profitability and expansion		↑	M	NRM works can lead to more productive land. Hobby farmers generally have a lot of disposable income, thus having a positive impact on local businesses. Southern Rivers CMA spending benefits the local economy.
Increased employment		↑	M	NRM works provide secondary employment through fencing, pumps, advice and design. There is a huge demand for fencing.
Gaining more formal and informal skills		↑	M	Supplying education is a cost to the CMA organisation, but the return on investment is worthwhile.
Community networks and interaction		↑	M	There is a ‘feel good’ aspect to Landcare and involvement in NRM projects.
Participation in NRM		↔	M	The majority of Aboriginal people surveyed believed that the level of consultation is improving (Fenton and Rickert 2008b). Participation has declined and school numbers have dropped because people are leaving the region – not as many young people to volunteer.
More effective NRM decision-making		↑	M	Most stakeholder organisations felt that the Southern Rivers CMA has provided effective regional leadership (Fenton and Rickert 2008d). The majority of Landcare groups have a high level of trust in the Southern Rivers CMA (Fenton and Rickert 2008c).

Condition		Trend		Data confidence	
	Very good	↑	Improving	H	High
	Good	↔	No change	M	Medium
	Fair	↓	Declining	L	Low
	Poor	?	Unknown		
	Very poor				
	No data				

Pressures

A number of pressures, centred on development, are influencing land-use change, rural adjustment and modifying links to ESSW in the region. These links affect people's ability to use environmental services but can be felt individually as financial, relationship and time pressures.

Major pressures come from overall resource condition (eg soil health), availability (eg increased competition for water), access (eg for recreation, traditional foods and medicines) and quality (eg water quality). Additionally, people with long-term associations with an area – particularly Aboriginal people with cultural responsibilities for landscape health – can feel strong emotional and spiritual connections to the land which increases overall ESSW.

Key pressures include:

- population change – across NSW, rural areas have experienced decline while small towns (200 to 1000 people) have had low growth. However, the Southern Rivers region has experienced high coastal growth in the north-east and also in areas close to Canberra. There have been generally low levels of mobility in the rural population. Maintaining a viable population is critical, as NRM is labour-intensive
- community capacity – community capacity is often measured by a community's level of volunteering, optimism and participation in community life. Although rural communities traditionally have a high rate of volunteers (as shown in Figure 3), they also have an ageing membership and are experiencing decline and drought-related stress. There is little capacity for more voluntary work in NRM in some rural areas in this region, although 'tree changers' are a potential source of new volunteers

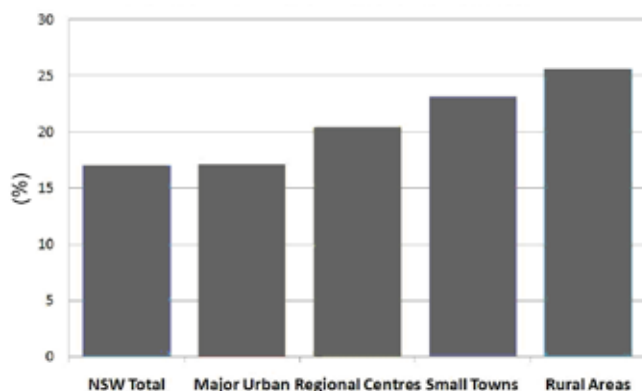


Figure 3 Percentage of population who volunteer (2006)

Graph provided by BRS from ABS data, 2008

- drought/climate change – coastal areas with high rainfall, fertile soils and access to markets are increasing in agricultural importance as predicted rainfall decreases. However, they are also under the most pressure from urban development
- market incentives – there are emerging opportunities for trading environmental assets, eg private forestry, carbon trading and biobanking. Many small landholders orientate production towards tourism markets
- tourism – demand for holiday accommodation is a driving force behind the expansion of coastal centres.

Management activity

Monitoring ESSW is an evolving field for government and, as such, monitoring work has been developed to mesh with national approaches. Fieldwork has gathered qualitative data on the impact of CMA actions and also larger scale government investments in NRM. Monitoring occurs through several processes, including key stakeholder focus groups and interviews, with larger community samples improving reliability where possible.

State level

The State Plan target requirement is to ‘contribute more effectively to natural resource investment decision-making achieving socio-economic outcomes’. The NSW Government aims to achieve this through improved priority identification and decision-making capacity of CMAs and agencies. A socio-economic training module, designed to extend Industry & Investment NSW’s (I&I) monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement processes, is currently being developed. I&I is working with several CMAs and state target themes to ensure the effectiveness of this module.

Other socio-economic activities being undertaken at the state level include:

- developing common guidelines for country-wide socio-economic analysis
- identifying Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment priorities and progress assessments to assist land-use planning and NRM investment decision-making
- implementing the Aboriginal BioBanking Program
- development of a state-wide Aboriginal land and NRM Action Plan ‘Healthy Country – Healthy Communities’ – this will assist in developing clear policies, principles and tools to improve socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal people through enhanced capacity to participate in land management and NRM
- the Aboriginal Heritage Mapping and Assessment Program, which is a whole-of-Government program that provides a coordinated and consistent approach to collecting, managing and using spatial information for Aboriginal heritage values – the program incorporates cultural mapping standards, regionally based assessment and appropriate management of Aboriginal information. It aims to develop inter-agency priorities and key deliverables for Aboriginal heritage information, assessment and mapping.

Regional level

The Southern Rivers CMA is undertaking the following activities in relation to the socio-economic target:

- a number of incentive funding programs are operated by the Southern Rivers CMA to enable landholders to adopt better land management practices without being financially disadvantaged – the CMA recognises that landholders require financial support to implement land management change that ensures environmental outcomes
- establishment of a large, community support program with seven community support officers who assist Landcare and community groups in achieving NRM aims
- there are four Aboriginal support positions in the Southern Rivers CMA – these positions assist Aboriginal community groups with NRM, employment opportunities and group development.

Further reading

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Map Stats by Natural Resource Management Region*, [www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/ABSNavigation/prenav/TopicList?method=Place%20of%20Usual%20Residence&subaction=1&producttype=MapStats&areacode=NRM104&action].

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: New South Wales*, Cat. no. 4713.1.55.0001.

Graphs for employment change by Information and Library Services 2008, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Orange.

Fenton Dr M and Rickert A, EBC 2008b, *Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority: Aboriginal People and Caring for Country Benchmarking Survey*, Townsville.

Fenton Dr M and Rickert A, EBC 2008c, *Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority: Landcare Groups Benchmarking Survey*, Townsville.

Fenton Dr M and Rickert A, EBC 2008d, *Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority: Stakeholder Organisations Benchmarking Survey*, Townsville.

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DECCW 2010/606 ISBN 978 1 74232 868 3 November 2010

Cover photo: Michael van Ewijk/DECCW – ‘canoeists on river’