

# Waterwatch – Moving Forward

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## ABSTRACT

Waterwatch is a community-based water quality monitoring initiative founded upon the principles of participatory action research. Since its inception in the early 1990s, it has established a sound reputation for its environmental education programmes, and has continuously refined its water quality monitoring standards to ensure community-collected data is valid and useful for natural resource managers. However, a 2004 review of Waterwatch identified that the true value of Waterwatch as a ‘capacity building’ tool for regional natural resource management (NRM) bodies, has not been as widely appreciated as it should have been. The review also highlighted that the broader role of community-based monitoring in regional NRM has not been fully recognised. The review recommended that a focus on the capacity building qualities of Waterwatch, particularly as a mechanism to embed Waterwatch into regional NRM delivery and additional national support were essential to ensure the sustainability of Waterwatch.

In June 2006, the Australian Government commenced a 2-year ‘National Waterwatch Facilitator Project’ with the aim of implementing many of the recommendations of the national needs/gaps analysis. The project provides national support and coordination for the Waterwatch network and is developing key strategic and operational initiatives that will set Waterwatch up for the future. Now, after 18 months of the National Waterwatch Facilitator project, we now have a clearer picture of the drivers and barriers that affect the sustainability and effectiveness of Waterwatch and the support required to sustain Waterwatch into the future.

This paper summarises the current strengths and weaknesses of national-level support for Waterwatch and outlines some ideas about how Waterwatch might be sustained into the future. The paper is in three parts:

- 1) A background to Waterwatch and how this history impacts on current perceptions of the program
- 2) An overview of the current strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for Waterwatch now
- 3) A discussion about the key needs of Waterwatch in terms of governance and institutional structures to ensure effective support can be provided, particularly at the national level.

The paper concludes that there are many underlying strengths of Waterwatch and the timing is now ripe for Waterwatch to really mature and move on to bigger and better things.

## INTRODUCTION

Waterwatch is a community-based water quality monitoring initiative founded upon the principles of participatory action research. Since its inception in the early 1990s, it has established a sound reputation for its environmental education programmes, and has continuously refined its water quality monitoring standards to ensure community-collected data is valid and useful for natural resource managers. Waterwatch coordinators operate at local, regional, state and national scales to facilitate the engagement of communities in integrated

natural resource management (NRM). There are currently around 130 Waterwatch coordinators around Australia, supporting thousands of volunteers, who regularly monitor around 5000 registered sites.

With the shift from Natural Heritage Trust phase 1 (NHT1) to the extension of NHT (NHT2) in 2003, Waterwatch funding was rolled up into the Regional NRM Delivery Model. This marked the end of ten years of Waterwatch as an Australian Government Program in its own right. However, recognising the reputation of Waterwatch and the community's recognition of the 'brand', the Waterwatch name has continued to be recognised by the Australian Government and it still funds Waterwatch through the regional delivery model. The funding changes had a significant initial impact on Waterwatch in many States and Territories. However, as the 2004 'National Needs and Gaps Analysis of Community Participation in Waterwatch' (LSR, 2004) identified, these changes are potentially of benefit for Waterwatch because the structure and philosophies of Waterwatch provide many of the community engagement, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation tools and methods regional NRM bodies need. If regional NRM bodies embrace Waterwatch as a key delivery mechanism, the future of Waterwatch is bright.

The recent (2006) reviews of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) have revealed that there are still gaps and opportunities in regional natural resource management (NRM) across Australia. These relate to the capability of regional bodies to monitor and evaluate their impacts, to engage and inform their communities and key stakeholders, to share knowledge and data, and to form enduring partnerships and relationships with industry that effectively broaden the funding base for NRM (Bartlett, 2006). These are all areas in which Waterwatch can add value within the regional NRM delivery model.

A key to maximising this potential is demonstrating the value of Waterwatch to regional NRM bodies, in particular, as an integrated capacity building tool. An analysis of Waterwatch as a capacity building initiative for regional NRM can be found in a paper the National Waterwatch Facilitator presented to the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Stream Management Conference (Thomson 2007). That paper highlights how a focus on the 'capacity building' qualities of Waterwatch helps bridge the common misperceptions of Waterwatch as either an environmental education program or a community-based monitoring program.

A key problem for Waterwatch now, in trying to become embedded into the regional delivery model, is that the governance and institutional structures and processes at the national level are not currently strong enough to ensure an effective case can be presented to regional NRM bodies to make the investment in Waterwatch. The National Waterwatch Forum has analysed these issues and developed some 'support objectives' that if achieved would enable the process of embedding Waterwatch into the regional model to happen more effectively.

This paper presents those support objectives, but first presents some discussion around the context and need for support at the national scale. The paper is presented in three parts:

- 1) A background to Waterwatch and how this history impacts on current perceptions of the program
- 2) An overview of the current strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for Waterwatch
- 3) Moving forward: The key 'support objectives' or needs of Waterwatch in terms of governance and institutional structures that are needed to ensure Waterwatch can develop and be sustained for the long-term.

## **A BACKGROUND TO WATERWATCH**

### **What is Waterwatch?**

Waterwatch is a community-based water quality monitoring initiative founded upon the principles of participatory action research. Waterwatch is based on two entwined themes:

- 1) Participatory learning *for* sustainability, built around catchment health and water quality; and,
- 2) Community-based monitoring of water quality and aquatic habitats, providing valid community data of a known quality to assist natural resource managers in targeting their investments and monitoring the impacts of works on resource condition.

Both of these themes are essential components of building the capacity of communities, and natural resource managers, to adaptively manage catchments and waterways. Both of these themes are also successful mechanisms to effectively engage diverse communities in meaningful NRM activities at a number of levels – from building communication channels and partnerships, through to involving communities in the collection of data to inform adaptive management.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, it has established a sound reputation for its environmental education programmes, and has continuously refined its water quality monitoring standards to ensure community-collected data is valid and useful for natural resource managers.

Although no longer a funding program of the Australian Government, Waterwatch is still a 'program' in the sense that it is a coordinated, national initiative that works against a logic model (see Figure 1).

### **How is Waterwatch managed?**

The National Waterwatch Facilitator (NWF) coordinates Waterwatch at the national level, with the assistance of staff within the Australian Government's Joint NRM Team. The NWF is a contracted position, based on a similar model to the National Landcare Facilitator. A National Waterwatch Forum, comprising representatives of Waterwatch programmes in each State and Territory, oversee the development of Waterwatch resources, professional development of coordinators and manage communications across the network. Australian Government funding is available, through the Regional Delivery Program of the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP), for Waterwatch at the regional level. Australian Government funding is also provided for the National Waterwatch Facilitator Project and for some state-level support. Waterwatch is commonly co-funded at the local level by NGOs, local governments, regional NRM bodies, water authorities and the corporate sector. This maximises the possibility that Waterwatch can be embedded into a range of NRM planning, decision-making and action programmes. It also means that a wide range of organisations are engaged in Waterwatch, providing valuable partnership opportunities.

Waterwatch does not exist, at the national level, as a legal entity. This is a key need in ensuring the sustainability of Waterwatch and is discussed in more detail later in this paper.

### **What does Waterwatch do?**

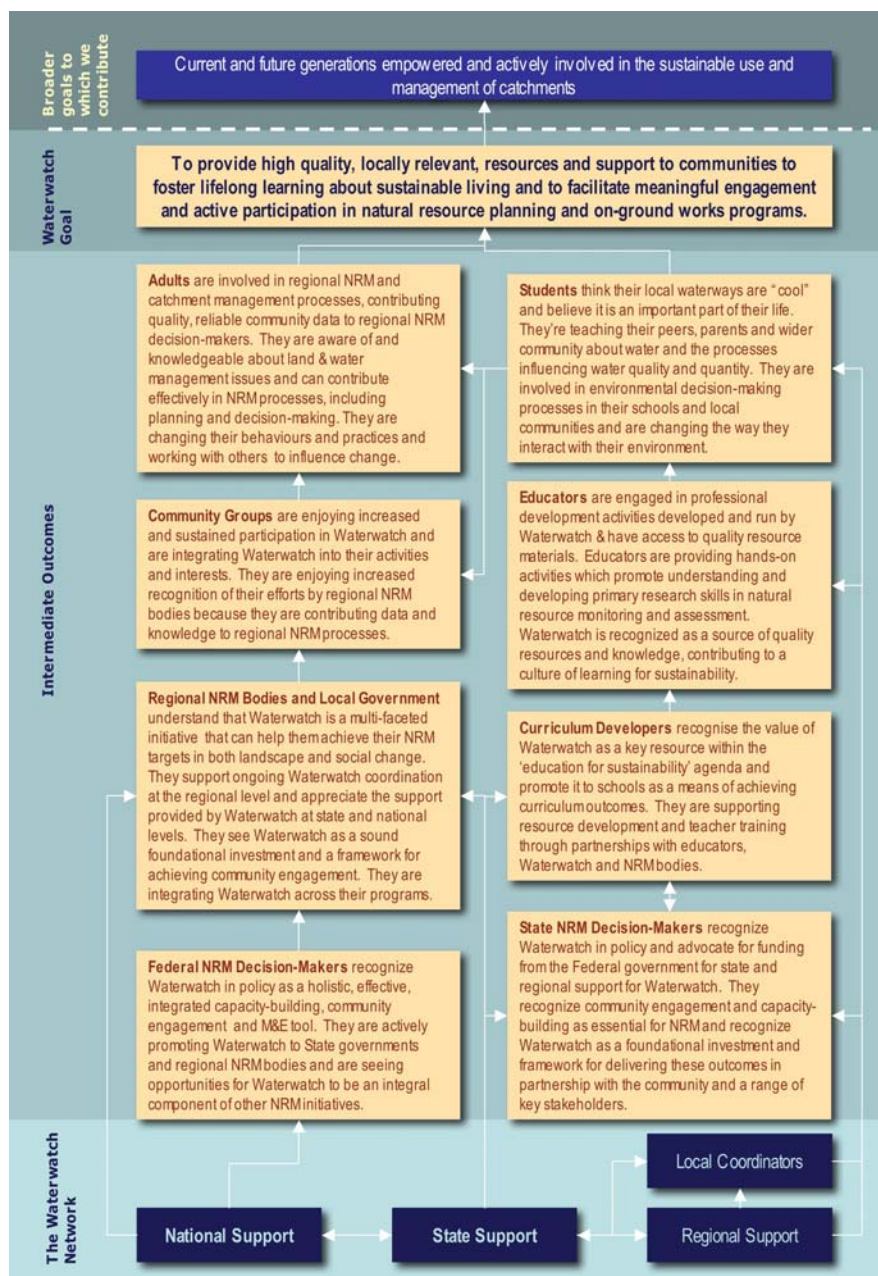
Waterwatch facilitates the involvement of communities in a wide range of activities, which can be specifically tailored to assist key audiences achieve agreed outcomes. Most activities involve hands-on environmental monitoring activities because Waterwatch is based on theories

of participatory action research. Waterwatch helps empower people to identify issues of concern in their local catchments and participate in the development of workable solutions that fit their own landscapes, lifestyles and livelihoods. Where Waterwatch coordinators are embedded into regional NRM program delivery, they ensure that these local actions and monitoring programmes contribute to the strategic priorities of the regional bodies.

Waterwatch develops and supports tools and methods to enable volunteers to collect valid, reliable data that can be used by a variety of natural resource managers. These tools and methods are developed in consultation with the community, scientists, government agencies and natural resource managers.

Waterwatch supports environmental education in primary and secondary schools. It does this by producing high quality, locally relevant curriculum-based resources and innovative activities to involve students of all ages in practical activities to foster learning about environmental issues.

**Figure 1: Waterwatch Program Logic**



## **Waterwatch as a 'Model Program'**

One of the first activities of the National Waterwatch Facilitator was to facilitate a 'Program Logic' and strategic planning workshop involving representatives from state Waterwatch programs (see Figure 1). The articulation of this 'program logic' has been a basis for other key initiatives recommended by the national needs/gaps analysis, in particular a Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement framework.

Because of its scalability, its multi-layered support structure and the nature of its program logic, Waterwatch can be justifiably called a 'model program'. It can be applied across diverse landscapes and social contexts and be adapted to ensure that it responds to the local biophysical and social contexts and is responsive to the needs of hosts and participants. Waterwatch comprises a framework of systems, protocols and methods, a network of coordinators to provide training, support and coordination, and a network of volunteers and participants.

## **Historical Successes**

The National Needs/Gaps Analysis (LSR 2004) identified that Waterwatch has an excellent reputation. It is seen as:

- Being independent ('bigger than any one organisation'),
- A very effective engagement and capacity building tool,
- Widely applicable and flexible across a range of biophysical and social contexts, and
- Well respected for its ability to build partnerships across all tiers of government, industry, NGOs, community groups, the education sector and the scientific community.

Communities, industries, the corporate sector and governments at all scales had (and still have in many places) enormous respect for Waterwatch.

However, the Needs/Gaps Analysis identified that a lack of national support, discontinuity of funding, and a lack of clear communications and support, particularly about realigning funding for Waterwatch through the regional delivery model, has had a very negative impact on Waterwatch in many States and Territories. In states such as Victoria, where an early transition to regional delivery was made and where state-level support for Waterwatch was strong, the transition was smoother and these regions have continued to build on their historical achievements.

Participation figures from the historical record are provided in Table 1 below. The participation numbers only tell a small part of the story. It was observed in the National Needs/Gaps Analysis that past efforts in monitoring and evaluating the contribution of Waterwatch were insufficient to enable the outcomes of investing in Waterwatch to be communicated effectively to investors. Waterwatch has many impacts, such as:

- Raising awareness about water quality and catchment health.
- Enhancing the connection between communities and their catchments and waterways.
- Equipping community members with the skills and knowledge to more effectively engage in NRM planning processes – because they understand what water quality data means, what influences water quality, and what can be done to improve water quality.

- Build networks and lines of communications with communities, industries, government, etc.
- Engender an interest in water, catchment management among individuals who may then become interested in pursuing a career in natural resource management.
- Engendering a shared vision for waterway and catchment health and motivating and equipping people to participate in on-ground actions that will contribute to achieving these outcomes.
- Building up knowledge about water resources, riparian and aquatic habitats through a range of monitoring programs, oral histories and other methods.

There is anecdotal evidence of these outcomes occurring all over Australia where Waterwatch programs have been run. Part of the new MERI framework is to design and implement various standard reporting processes and a ‘most significant change’ methodology to document these outcomes.

One of the less well-documented facets of Waterwatch is the characteristics of Waterwatch volunteers and participants. Waterwatch participants are:

- Keen
- Passionate
- Willing to volunteer over long time frames (as long as they perceive they are making a contribution)
- Enjoying what they do, especially in contributing data that will be used to make decisions.
- Always expanding their interests from water, aquatic and riparian habitats, waterway health, catchment health – water is the great integrator.

These characteristics equip Waterwatch participants to go on to do ‘bigger’ things such as contribute as members of catchment and NRM body boards. There are many NRM board members currently around Australia that are, or have been, Waterwatch volunteers. Again, we need to document these stories of change and the broader contributions Waterwatch makes in the NRM effort.

**Table 1: Participation in Waterwatch at key points in time**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Sites</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Participants</b>
<b>Nov. 1999</b>	5,495	2,202	No data
<b>End of NHT1</b>	5,500	3,500	50,000
<b>May 2003</b>	6,843	2,295	57,873

## **CURRENT STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF WATERWATCH**

### **Current Situation**

Piecing together a current snapshot of Waterwatch across Australia is a challenging task since Waterwatch ceased being its own Program. There is currently no internal reporting processes (as there was when reporting was tied to funding through the Waterwatch Program) so it is very difficult to collect consistent information on the scope of Waterwatch activities. This was recognised in the National Needs/Gaps Analysis and the National Waterwatch Facilitator, in conjunction with the National Waterwatch Forum, is currently working on a MERI framework to resolve this problem.

The participation data reported here is sourced from the States/Territories (see Table 2 below). However, it does not accurately convey the whole picture. There are inconsistencies in how regional programmes report their participant numbers, particularly in terms of the number of school programs and children participating. Then there are all the indirect activities that may not be specifically run by Waterwatch, but the proponents and leaders have been trained and supported by Waterwatch coordinators.

**Table 2: Scope of Waterwatch Activities by State, as at November 2006.**

State	Coordinators	Ave FTEs	Groups	Monitors	Schools	No. Sites
ACT	2	0.60	24	74	8	58
ACT & NSW	1	0.6	7	19	65	91
NSW	13	0.99	388	n/d	219	1242
NT	2	0.7	n/d	n/d	n/d	?
QLD	20	0.83	n/d	n/d	n/d	?
SA	15	0.93	196	3652	321	637
TAS	6	0.63	n/d	n/d	n/d	142
VIC	54	0.76	725	10968	347	1877
WA	16	0.53	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>1340</b>	<b>14,713</b>	<b>960</b>	<b>4047</b>

n/d = no data or inconsistent definitions

### Current Threats to Waterwatch

Current threats to Waterwatch are evident at national, state and regional levels. At the national scale, there is a lack of clarity and direction in terms of how the Australian Government sees Waterwatch now and into the future. There are individuals within the Department of Environment and Water Resources who are supportive, but there is no clear political commitment or policy position. This situation puts Waterwatch at risk due to staff changes and an erosion of 'corporate memory' about what Waterwatch is, how it works, and what it achieves. Since 2003 commitment to national support has been based on an election commitment to "continue to support the 50,000 volunteers involved in Waterwatch nationally" (Minister Kemp, 2003). The lack of political ownership and little commitment in policy leaves Waterwatch in a precarious position nationally.

Waterwatch is at risk of further disintegration in some States/Territories because some regional bodies, agencies and NGO's are developing and implementing similar community-based monitoring and community awareness/education programs, but using their own brands. Many of these are being based on Waterwatch methods and tools<sup>1</sup>, often without acknowledgement.

There are several dangers in this trend:

- Confusion within communities about program names and identities.
- Inconsistencies in methods, messages, selection of parameters, data confidence and data management.
- Waste and duplication through lack of a willingness to share and learn from other programs and practices, etc.
- Lack of support and consistent training for coordinators and staff.

<sup>1</sup> Plagiarism is a potentially significant problem that will only be exacerbated if branding issues are not resolved and if there are not sufficient resources to monitor, and respond to, requests to use copyrighted material. Unapproved use of Waterwatch IP threatens the future of Waterwatch by undermining its scientific credibility, brand disintegration and loss of our ability to monitor who is using Waterwatch methods and tools, and for what purpose.

- Perceptions that community data cannot be used for NRM planning and decision-making.

A perceived lack of support by the Australian Government, evidenced by limited national-level support over recent years, and the lack of resources for national support is driving much of this fragmentation. Without strong national support and coordination, regional programs cannot be strong. They are already facing barriers to their further development because of a lack of effective leadership and direction at the national level. This is evident even where there is strong state support. The kinds of barriers I hear about from NRM body executive staff and Board Chairs are:

- Perceived lack of a clear policy direction or clarity around the validity of investing in Waterwatch. In some areas there are broader issues about the role NRM bodies see themselves playing in monitoring water quality at all.
- A lack of clarity around the possibility/availability of funding for Waterwatch through the regional NRM investment planning processes.
- Some concern about a lack of rigour and validity in Waterwatch data.

The latter is an issue that Waterwatch has been successfully tackling and the real need now is to communicate these efforts more widely. The first two points are clearly the realm of the Australian Government – particularly the Joint NRM Team. There is therefore significant potential to lose more support and commitment unless Waterwatch is more widely recognised by key NRM decision-makers and policy developers.

There is a need to ensure all states and territories provide what the National Needs/Gaps Analysis identified as critical state-level support in the areas of data confidence, training of coordinators, coordination of data management and making links with state-wide programs and policies. It is only at the state level that there is the opportunity to integrate Waterwatch data confidence, data management and identify a valid place for community in broader monitoring and evaluation programmes. Whilst each State/Territory has their own school curriculum, there will be the need to provide state-level support to embed Waterwatch effectively into school curriculum.

The national identity of Waterwatch and the commitment of national project officers helped to maintain program delivery through the transition from phase 1 to 2 of NHT. However these arrangements were not conducive to the continued coordination and development of the Program, and were not sustainable. The reduction of the national support role in Waterwatch over recent years has left little cohesion of program delivery in states without state-wide coordination. It is also beginning to pose risks to coordination and delivery of Waterwatch in states where this state-wide coordination does exist.

Some of these risks include:

- Reduction in State and Regional commitment to the program (funding and resourcing) as a result of the loss of program identity and drop-off in Australian Government commitment to the Waterwatch program
- Reduced influence with regional NRM bodies to ensure quality and consistent delivery of the Waterwatch program at state and national level
- A compromised ability for Waterwatch to adapt to changing policy and investment foci due to the loss of two-way communication and formal linkages (eg. steering committee) with federal and state policy and investment teams
- Growing perceptions that Waterwatch may be becoming irrelevant, due to a lack of capacity to monitor and evaluate program delivery, and the lack of formal reporting processes to

communicate outcomes and achievements to investors and key stakeholders at state and national levels

- Growing dissent among volunteers and participants due to the reduced capacity of coordinators to deliver the Waterwatch program and support communities' on-going participation in engagement and capacity building for NRM

## **Current Limitations of Waterwatch**

Waterwatch presently suffers from an image problem. It is commonly perceived to be a 'school education' program and whilst others might recognise that Waterwatch is also a community-based monitoring programme, their perception is often that the data emerging from these activities are of dubious quality. This is despite significant effort at national, state and regional levels to work with scientists to develop rigorous monitoring programs, sampling and testing procedures etc. to ensure community-collected data is as valid and reliable as possible.

The discontinuity of funding has also resulted in some disengagement of community in some regions where Waterwatch programs ceased due to lack of funding. This may have a negative influence in any attempt to re-engage such communities in community-based monitoring.

In some States/Territories (particularly QLD, NT and parts of TAS) there seems to be some resistance to the Waterwatch brand because of the sense of loss they experienced when funding ceased. Unless there is a clear message from the Australian Government that funding for Waterwatch will be supported into the future, there seems little point trying to argue the case for using the Waterwatch brand in these areas.

The other key limitation in Waterwatch presently is a lack of capacity to respond should the potential of Waterwatch be realised. In other words, if more of our potential hosts, sponsors and community suddenly came on board, there would be no capacity to effectively service them.

One of the potentially negative influences on Waterwatch is the possibility that 'competing' programs and initiatives will override or win more support than Waterwatch. There are so many opportunities for Waterwatch to be utilised as a delivery mechanism for a whole range of NRM and Education for Sustainability programs, but it seems that opportunities for partnership approaches with Waterwatch are being missed. This may be due to a lack of communications/awareness about Waterwatch presently, or because there is a tendency to roll out new projects and programs with new identities, instead of maintaining and supporting existing, well recognised and supported brands.

## **Key Opportunities for Waterwatch**

There are significant opportunities for Waterwatch now. A few are briefly outlined below:

### *National Water Initiative, drought and climate change*

Water has arguably never been this high on the agenda across the whole Australian community as it is now. There are significant opportunities to expand Waterwatch and ensure it operates more effectively.

### *NRM Futures*

There is significant opportunity now, while the third phase of NHT is being shaped, to make policy and program design decisions to ensure Waterwatch can be effectively designed into future NRM arrangements.

### *M&E*

The recent reviews of NHT/NAP have highlighted the need to develop the capability of NRM bodies, state and federal agencies to monitor and evaluate their impacts. Waterwatch can contribute to both the monitoring of environmental conditions water quality, river health, catchment health, but also, and possibly more importantly in terms of understanding the outcomes of NRM programs, the social capacity for change.

### *Indigenous Engagement*

There are significant opportunities for Waterwatch in indigenous communities, indigenous ranger programs and the development and implementation of Indigenous Protected Area Management Plans.

### *NRM Communications – Mosaic Map*

The Mosaic Map project provides significant opportunities for Waterwatch and broader NHT programs in communicating Waterwatch case studies and stories of change.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

To make the most of these current opportunities, we need to address the challenges outlined earlier, and be more proactive as a network in articulating what we stand for and what we can achieve. The next section of this paper outlines some ideas about how to address these challenges and move forward.

### **Addressing the challenges facing Waterwatch**

There are three key areas in which Waterwatch, along with its supporters and sponsors, need to focus in the short-term in order to ensure a sustainable future for Waterwatch. These are:

- Maintaining and enhancing national coordination and support, through the National Waterwatch Facilitator project and with the support of the Joint NRM Team of the Australian Government.
- Implementing the National Strategic Plan to ensure Waterwatch is embedded into the regional delivery model.
- Addressing governance and institutional structures to ensure Waterwatch survives and has the capacity to effectively support its operations.

These key areas are now discussed in more detail.

### **National Waterwatch Facilitator Project**

After nearly 18 months I now feel as though we are all starting to understand the roles, potentials and limitations of the National Waterwatch Facilitator project (NWF). We are also starting to understand how some of the limitations of the current structures impact on the effectiveness of the position. It is quite normal for a new position to take some time to really bed-in and become truly effective. But there have been some significant challenges to overcome in the past 18 months, many of which were unforeseen. This experience has exposed some risks for Waterwatch nationally and for the NWF project.

The need for national-level coordination and support for Waterwatch is undeniable. Without it Waterwatch will become more and more disjointed and dysfunctional. It would of course be possible for regions and states to run their own Waterwatch programs without national support and coordination, but I believe there are some good reasons for maintaining national support, for example:

- There are significant opportunities to better integrate policies and programs if there is national coordination.
- Having a nationally consistent (and protected) brand ensures continuity, enhanced recognition and opportunities to share branded materials.
- There are opportunities to significantly reduce duplication of time and money in resource development if the Waterwatch network is coordinated through common communications mechanisms.
- The National Waterwatch Forum has more potential to influence policy and program design as an entity rather than individual states and territories having to
- Volunteers like being associated with a 'national program' and making a contribution to something bigger.

The NWF was first conceived as a recommendation within the Needs/Gaps Analysis. The idea was that having a contracted position would have advantages, especially in terms of ensuring that the NWF focussed purely on Waterwatch and did not get drawn into other Australian Government business. Another key advantage was that an independent NWF would be more likely to be 'owned' by the network. There were also many operational advantages and efficiencies. Some of the key weaknesses, it was recognised, included the problem of not being within the Australian Government bureaucracy and therefore having the close ties with program and policy managers. However, this was to be overcome by ensuring two things:

- 1) An officer within the Capacity Building Team would remain as a Waterwatch project manager and ensure these linkages were made (either directly or by advising the NWF of initiatives/changes/directions).
- 2) A steering-committee comprising Australian and state-government representatives and strategic thinkers on water, NRM and capacity building would be formed to guide the NWF and to establish a sound strategic direction for Waterwatch.

These two vital components of national support were not fully implemented. In the case of the first point, staff changes and a change in direction of the Capacity Building Team has affected the support provided. Secondly, the steering committee was not implemented, partly due to the effects of the staff changes.

Another key limitation of the current structure is that Waterwatch nationally is not an entity, and is therefore reliant on the Department of Environment and Water Resources to enable partnerships to be given effect through MOU's. This means that the National Waterwatch Facilitator cannot sign-off on MOU's on behalf of Waterwatch. The effect of this is that although I have worked towards establishing relations and partnerships with key stakeholders, none can be ratified unless the Joint NRM Team signs off on them.

Ideally, the National Waterwatch Facilitator needs to be a part of a team – a national Waterwatch office – that performs a number of functions including maintaining network membership, collating and reporting stories of change and other data against the MERI, developing tools and resources, maintaining the web-site, organising and running meetings of the National Waterwatch Forum and/or steering committee, etc. This would free up the NWF to focus on building relations with key stakeholders and investors and strategic planning.

Effectively supporting and coordinating something like the Waterwatch network, at the national scale, is probably beyond the capacity of one person, albeit with part-time administrative support, as I have been doing.

### **National Waterwatch Strategic Plan**

The National Waterwatch Strategic Plan for 2007-2010 was an outcome of an October 1996 'Program Logic and Strategic Planning Workshop' and subsequent consultations. The strategic plan is intended to guide the development of Waterwatch *operationally*, mainly in embedding Waterwatch into the regional delivery model and education for sustainability initiatives such as the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI). A separate action plan or brief for a review of institutional structures and governance arrangements for Waterwatch nationally will be prepared over the next few months as a means of deciding how Waterwatch should exist, nationally, as an entity.

The Strategic Plan is also a key communications document because it helps unify the network towards common objectives. It will be the basis of the National Waterwatch Communications Plan which I am currently working on. It is also the basis for the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Framework which was recently completed.

The Strategic Plan will be finalised by the end of November, 2007.

### **Support Necessary to sustain Waterwatch**

There is a clear need for better support mechanisms for the Waterwatch program to be developed at both National and State levels. The National Waterwatch Forum workshopped 'support objectives' at their August 2007 meeting. Table 3 outlines the outcomes of that workshop, describing the support objectives and the benefits accrued if they were achieved.

**Table 3: Support Objectives for Waterwatch Nationally**

<i>Support Objective</i>	<i>Benefit</i>
To have National commitment to and ownership of the Waterwatch program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On-going Australian Government commitment to/ownership of Waterwatch will encourage more State and regional investment and commitment and enable the AG to gain kudos from its investment among the community and with regional NRM stakeholders</li> </ul>
To have clear governance structures for the Waterwatch program at the national level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarifying roles and responsibilities will facilitate leadership and timely and proactive decision-making, enabling continuous program improvement and opportunities for value-adding to program delivery to be utilised</li> </ul>
To provide formal linkages to national and state policy development and delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will enable Waterwatch to adapt to changing policy needs, thus remaining relevant and able to contribute effectively to the NRM community</li> </ul>
To recognise Waterwatch in capacity building policy and investment directives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regions will adopt Waterwatch as a capacity building program if encouraged to do so by investors.</li> </ul>

To strengthen Waterwatch's role in the Australian Government's capacity building mechanisms and M&E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This will ensure Waterwatch continues to deliver AG priorities in capacity building and complements and adds value to other initiatives/programs</li> </ul>
To provide avenues to contribute to funding allocation discussions and decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This will ensure efficient investment and program delivery in regions and funding security for regional programs</li> </ul>
To provide program coordination at national level in conjunction with state support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic support will strengthen regional delivery, promote efficiency and drive continual improvement.</li> </ul>
To have the ability to enter into formal national agreements (MoU's etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National partnerships will strengthen program identity and delivery, and value-add to program outcomes</li> </ul>
The ability to protect the Waterwatch reputation through branding control and quality assurance mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will ensure Waterwatch continues to be recognised as a high quality national program, encouraging communities and partners to be involved</li> </ul>
To adequately sustain the program through sufficient resourcing of national support mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will enable effective program coordination and delivery and ensure national initiatives and issues are developed and resolved at the appropriate (national) level.</li> </ul>
To establish reporting and feedback channels to investors on outputs, outcomes and achievements of Waterwatch at regional, state and national scales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting processes will demonstrate the value of investment and thereby provide funding security and maintain partner's commitment, enabling a more sustainable program</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

Waterwatch is an integrated, multi-layered capacity building initiative that provides multiple entry points for communities into the NRM 'world'. It provides opportunities for people to be meaningfully involved (truly engaged and empowered) in learning more about 'their patch' and beyond. Waterwatch creates a shared 'point of interest' (a river or creek, an estuary) – sites that have real *meaning* to people – thus facilitating communications between community and NRM institutions. Waterwatch activities also allow people to express their values and ideas about natural resource conditions and targets, allowing NRM planners and decision-makers to understand community values and aspirations more fully than attempting to communicate through written plans and strategies.

Waterwatch should form a key component of every regional NRM authority's programs because it is an effective method of integrating community engagement and capacity enhancement activities with practice-change programs. There are many opportunities for regional NRM bodies to extract value from the Waterwatch network and from the stock of social and human capital that has been invested in Waterwatch over more than a 15 years.

However, if Waterwatch is going to realise its potential, it needs significantly more support from all of its supporters and stakeholders, but in particular the Australian Government, to ensure it can become embedded into the regional NRM delivery model. The Australian Government recognises the value of Waterwatch and has acted towards implementing the recommendations

of the national needs and gaps analysis. The National Waterwatch Facilitator project was a key component of the task of reinvigorating national support. Some good things have been achieved in terms of establishing a more strategic and coordinated basis for Waterwatch through the NWF project. However, the NWF project has highlighted many gaps in institutional and governance arrangements for Waterwatch, and circumstances around Waterwatch have served to reinforce several risks to Waterwatch. Some timely and consultative decision-making by the Australian Government can overcome these risks and challenges.

## **References**

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