Institutional barriers and opportunities: processes and arrangements for natural resource management in Australia

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Abstract While “institutional failure” is commonly cited as a core barrier to sustainable resource management, operational prescriptions or criteria for institutional design are rare. Institutions are crucial, and may be barriers or opportunities. This article offers some principles and design features for “adaptive” institutions, capable of balancing the core principles of persistence, purposefulness, information-richness, inclusiveness and flexibility. It then draws on emerging findings from recent Australian research to identify some major institutional barriers and opportunities for improving capacities in sustainable resource management.

Keywords Resource management; water; institutions; policy; Australia

Introduction: institutions to pervert or empower?
Both our understanding and management of water, rivers and catchments face many challenges. Which policy instruments to use, what future trends in resource and environmental quality will be, how economically viable are water-dependent human activities going to be, how best to organise the range of values and stakeholders, and more. The political and social context of managing rivers and other natural resources keeps changing, too. Globalisation, changing political and policy fashions and ideologies, micro-economic reform, rural and regional decline, desire for more discursive styles of political engagement, and more again.

One thing all these issues and changes have in common is an inevitable institutional dimension. Humans achieve collective aspirations, and resolve individual differences, through institutions and only through institutions, whether they be formal or informal, legal or economic, cultural or political, local or global. If we ignore the institutional settings of resource management, then we will not achieve what we set out to do. Institutions are both barriers to and opportunities for ecologically sustainable human development. Institutions can pervert or empower human potential.

There are increasing attempts to force water issues into a Cold War framework of nation state conflict. Foreign policy interests and some prominent scientists seem intent on beating up the prospects of “water wars”, and thus invoking “security” responses to water resource issues. In a review of this phenomenon, Barnett (2000) suggests that the environment-conflict thesis is “theoretically rather than empirically driven, and is both a product and legitimation of the Northern security agenda”. This illustrates an important institutional theme rather well. Institutions are defined more by the past than the present – they change slowly for the most part, and are more often suited to yesterday’s understanding and imperatives rather than those of today, let alone those of tomorrow. So institutions and political actors rooted in the geopolitics of yesterday seek to force tomorrow’s water issues into their own image, running the risk of enhancing political control and making conflict a self-fulfilling prophecy and lessening the chance of peaceful, mutually beneficial ways forward. The world’s institutional machinery of Northern economic domination, foreign
affairs, military and security are somewhat more potent than those of peace, cooperation and sustainable development.

Chair of the World Commission on Dams, Kader Asmal (2001), does not dismiss the possibility of water-related conflict in future, but asks the questions: “… have battles been fought over water? Is water scarcity a casus belli [an act justifying war]? Does it divide nations?” He answers “no” to these questions and argues that we should view water as a catalyst for peace and cooperation rather than a cause of conflict and division. Asmal bases this judgement on historical evidence. Since 805AD organised political bodies have signed some 3,600 water-related treaties; over that time there have been seven minor water-related conflicts all of which started over another issue. Water wars are not necessary unless someone wants them to be, and even water conflict is not inevitable. River managers should take that encouragement on board – overly realist approaches can emphasise conflict within one country also and pervert the direction of policy toward false choices.

Such perversions occur at finer resolutions, such as in Australia where three examples can serve to illustrate. First, the move toward rights markets in natural resources has been driven less by concern over sustainable resource management than by neo-liberal political philosophies that say the market is good and governments should lessen their intervention in society and the economy. National Competition Policy drove the Council of Australian Governments’ market-oriented water reforms more than environmental concern or even concern for the viability of agricultural water users. That does not mean that the reforms were not worthwhile – there appear to be some environmental benefits emerging – but it does say that using micro-economic policy and non-NRM institutions to achieve NRM (natural resource management) goals should probably be expected to have some unexpected or even unwanted results. General disinterest in the necessary, detailed empirical analysis of existing rights markets means that such results will be unexpected and therefore handled poorly (for exceptions to this disinterest, see Bjornlund and McKay 1996, 1998; Connor and Alden, in press).

Second, one of Australia’s finest institutions, the High Court, gave us the reasonable instruction to “go forth and negotiate” over shared use of pastoral leases in its Wik decision on native title. That this was possible had been demonstrated by the Cape York Heads of Agreement between indigenous people, pastoralists, conservationists and miners. That it was a logical extension of a century and a half of legal, cultural and policy history has been shown by Holmes (2000). But other, less noble elements within political institutions and organisations representing sectoral interests, fed by a growing populism, have worked hard against the prospect of civilised and humane negotiations. Third, some headline arguments concerning the severity of, and responses to, dryland salinity seem very much influenced by those parts of our institutional arrangements fixated on hydrology and plantations, actively ignoring those parts with something to say about, for example, the art of policy choice in the face of complexity and uncertainty, or the agronomy of deep-rooted pasture regimes.

So our institutions can be barriers to achieving our goals, but also the only way we can achieve them – they are opportunities also. Our institutional landscape is highly complex, and the task of identifying strengths and weaknesses, barriers and opportunities is just as complex. Properly, institutions are underlying and persistent rules, customs, arrangements and patterns of behaviour (Henningham 1994; Goodin 1996), and organisations the more immediate manifestations of these. For the purpose here of considering natural resource management arrangements, “institutions” can serve as the overall term, with the proviso that the organisations so included would have a good degree of acceptance, predictability and longevity.

Lack of progress toward sustainable resource management is widely attributed to institutional failure and inadequacy. However, the description and analysis of existing (and pre-
sumably inadequate) institutions is often imprecise, and the prescription of what would be better similarly vague. Creation of completely new institutions is rare; refashioning existing arrangements is more common. Careful thought is required in assessing the adequacy of existing arrangements, so that reform is useful and new tasks are not given to old institutions that lack the wherewithal. Hastily erected, new institutional arrangements, or quick and easy fixes that only have the dangerously unstable support of a “government policy commitment”, by definition have a high likelihood of falling down.

To do either – create anew or redesign – some guiding principles and maybe even design features are needed. In other work (Dovers 1995, 1997a, 1999a; Dovers and Mobbs 1997), the attributes of policy problems in sustainable resource management have been defined: such as spatial and temporal scale, complexity, uncertainty, contested values, and poorly defined property and policy rights and responsibilities. These attributes, it is argued, beg an “adaptive” approach to designing and maintaining policy processes and institutions, where the essentially experimental nature of what we do is admitted and close monitoring and constant improvement is paramount. The core principles of an adaptive approach – persistence, purposefulness, information-sensitivity, inclusiveness and flexibility – can be translated into more detailed, operational attributes or design features for adaptive institutions—see Table 1.

In a more neutral vein, river and other resource managers could do well to keep in mind the basic attributes of policy processes and institutions. With our current and constantly shifting maze of institutional arrangements, this is a core task, and the following “neutral design features” may help (Dovers and Mobbs 1997):

- extent or limits in geographical space (spatial scale)
- jurisdictional, political and administrative boundaries
- degree of permanence and longevity

Table 1 Attributes of (design features for) adaptive institutions (Dovers & Dore 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Purposeful</td>
<td>Having a clearly stated and understood vision and set of goals, and a mandate to pursue them</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Long-lived</td>
<td>Sufficient longevity to persist, experiment, learn and adapt (including maintenance of institutional memory)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Properly resourced</td>
<td>Sufficient resources to pursue and achieve goals, including human, financial, informational and intellectual/professional resources</td>
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<td>4. Statutory basis</td>
<td>Statutory base providing transparency and accountability, and a higher probability of persistence (including the existence of enabling legislation, appropriateness of this legislative backing, and the actual use of the powers and principles therein)</td>
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<td>5. Independence</td>
<td>Degree of independence and/or removal from day-to-day political pressures, and not being overly reliant on temporary mandate or resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Multi-functional</td>
<td>Integration of research, planning, management and/or policy roles, so that these are not kept separate or poorly connected</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Applied</td>
<td>Degree of applied or grounded focus (be this on a region, issue or sector), to ensure practicality and “ground truthing”</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Integrative</td>
<td>Integrating environmental, social and economics aspect, and pursuing cross-sectoral, cross-problem and/or cross-cultural views</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Coordinating</td>
<td>The maintenance of linkages with organisations and processes in cognate policy and management areas – accepting that no single arrangement can integrate all aspects of NRM and therefore there is a need to work collaboratively</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Participatory</td>
<td>Participatory structure and process that is clear, genuine, predictable and maintained over time (recognising that “participation” is a highly complex matter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Ability to compare</td>
<td>Ability or mandate for comparative analysis (whether concurrent or sequential)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Experimental</td>
<td>Mandate and ability to experiment with approaches and methods, and to move across disciplinary and professional boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Politically supported</td>
<td>Political context favouring establishment and support.</td>
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• intended or actual roles (informational, cultural, legal, economic, etc.)
• sectoral or issue coverage/focus
• nature and source of aims and mandate (in custom, or statute or common law)
• degree of autonomy
• accountability (how, to whom)
• formality or informality of operation
• political nature and support (actual, required)
• exclusiveness/inclusiveness (membership, representativeness)
• degree of community awareness and acceptance
• degree of functional and organisational flexibility
• resource requirements (financial, human, material)
• information requirements (internal, external)
• reliance on and linkages with other institutions.

This checklist can inform assessment of the suitability of either existing or proposed arrangements to the natural and human systems they are meant to have purchase on, whether these are at local government, catchment, regional, state or national scale.

Key political and social trends

If institutional arrangements for river management, or for anything else, are to work well, they must be suited to the operating environment of the time. More than that, they need to match emerging imperatives. Institutions, as historically defined constructs, are often out of step with what is happening in the world. This is particularly so with institutions for sustainability, as these will be required to express or drive changes to previous, inappropriate patterns of production, consumption, settlement and governance. I will identify major forces that are apparent now and that will be so over the foreseeable future. Institutions and policies that account for the following have a good chance of being relevant and effective. The first five are (virtually) global:

• **Sustainability**: the integration of environmental, social and economic considerations in policy, the recognition of the importance of biodiversity and ecological processes, and the consideration of the needs of future generations. For example, principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD), such as the precautionary principle, are now expressed in over 120 Australian statutes (Stein 2000).

• **Globalisation and internationalisation**: this is more than the “bogey-man” spectre of globalisation, but a highly complex and ongoing process with many dimensions – cultural, economic, commercial, informational, legal, political and ecological. It includes the rising power and reach of economic and commercial institutions but also, for example, the internationalisation of environmental law and human rights and the development of shared environmental standards.

• **Marketisation**: the manifestations of neo-liberal political and economic philosophy. It includes the application of economic instruments (eg. tradeable water rights) and, more importantly, the market-oriented reform of public institutions, organisations and policy processes (privatisation, corporatisation, outsourcing, contracting out, user pays, etc.).

• **Participation**: increasing theoretical arguments and political pressures, for and many actual moves toward, more inclusive, participatory and discursive ways of doing politics and policy.

• **Information technology**: significantly different modes for the gathering, storage, manipulation, access, dissemination, control and pricing of information, enabling both greater potential and new patterns of access/lack of access.

The next four are more specifically (though not solely) applicable to Australia:

• **Continuing degradation**: although things have improved in some areas, overall,
environmental quality is still declining and degradation of the natural resource base continues.

- **Populism and loss of political trust**: there has been an increasing purchase in political debates and strategies of simplistic ideas and convenient solutions, and a related loss of public trust in political, legal and scientific institutions and sources of expertise.

- **Negotiating federalism**: the ongoing negotiation of rights and responsibilities across Australian political jurisdictions, including an increasing number of experiments at non-traditional scales (district, catchments, regions).

- **Rural and regional decline**: interrelated and highly spatially differentiated patterns of demographic, social, economic and political change in non-metropolitan Australia.

These trends embody tensions and both barriers and opportunities. Taken together, they portray a dynamic and perhaps even unstable operating environment. That may be viewed by some as disturbing and challenging but, in crude ecological analogy, a disturbed environment offers the chance for new things to take root and flourish. It may be that what flourishes will support sustainability, promise and a generosity of human spirit, but that is not guaranteed.

**Exploring persistence and adaptability**

It is well enough accepted that past and present policy, institutional and management arrangements have been less than optimally effective and cohesive. In part, this *ad hocery* and policy amnesia can be explained by the recent arrival of sustainability issues on the policy agenda, and by complexity, uncertainty and still poorly developed information and policy capacities. But that does not explain the lack of purposeful building on experiences or of learning across sectors, issues and jurisdictions. The Productivity Commission’s (1999) finding that, in the implementation of ESD policy, agencies often failed to follow normal, good policy practice is indicative of a deeper malaise. We are still learning how to settle into Australian landscapes, and that important experiment has a long way to run. Yet our institutional arrangements do not reflect that importance, with the resource and environmental field fragmented across sectors, problems and jurisdictions, and comparatively weak and uncoordinated in comparison to other policy fields. This situation would be familiar to resource managers and users from other countries also.

This issue of learning and improving across the entire policy and management field has been insufficiently attended to. In the discussion of barriers and opportunities in the next section, as well as my own analyses of Australian policy and institutions, this paper is informed by work undertaken within two recent projects. Both pursued the themes expressed so far and particularly the need to connect past and present. The first project has resulted in the book *Environmental History and Policy: Still Settling Australia* (Dovers 2000a). This brought together a range of disciplinary and sectoral perspectives on the question of the relevance of environment history to current environmental problems. The theme of that book – “still settling” – emphasises the uncertainty that pervades NRM issues, and the fact that we should accept our current decisions and actions as contingent experiments in the ongoing process of human settlement of Australian landscapes that has been going on for thousands of years.

The second project is the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation (LWRRDC)-funded *Processes and Institutions for Resource and Environmental Management: Australian experiences*, a multi-author endeavour reviewing Australian experiences over the past three decades. This has brought together a diverse range of researchers and practitioners to consolidate lessons accrued across time, jurisdictions and sectors (Dovers and Wild River, forthcoming). The participants in this project address a set of common themes, summarised in proposed key attributes of adaptive institutions: persistence, purposefulness, information-richness, inclusiveness and flexibility.
As the paper proceeds I will refer to the work of contributors to these two projects. The following discussion is very much a summary of a body of related, and in some cases still in-progress, work. Although informed by others’ work, this is of course the author’s interpretation and full consideration of the range of work referred to here and elsewhere is encouraged. Indeed, it should be taken as a rule that there are no single, correct views – the issues are too complex and the debate is a political one dealing with values and visions of what we want for our society and landscapes.

Barriers and opportunities
The remainder of the paper identifies a small number of core barriers and opportunities. The aim is to combine a critical view of past and existing arrangements with a positive view of what is possible. The issues dealt with flow quite directly from the preceding discussion of the challenges we face and the political and social trends likely to be important in the future.

Interjurisdictional arrangements
For better or for worse, Australia has a federal system with concurrent powers across three levels of government – a similar enough situation to many other countries. Whether one views this as a barrier, preventing purposeful, coordinated responses, or as an opportunity for learning from different experiences, the fact remains that interjurisdictional arrangements are far from settled. More than any other policy field, in NRM the challenge of coordinating across political boundaries is acute. Currently, there is much talk of partnership approaches between government, and much hope invested in regional and catchment scale arrangements (Dore and Woodhill 1999). These emerging arrangements represent an opportunity to focus resource management at more ecologically and hydrologically appropriate scales, and to engage communities better. But, if poorly planned, coordinated and resourced they may be barriers, as we mess about with a fourth tier of governance to hide our failure to make the existing three tiers work properly. If catchment and regional initiatives are used to conceal the failures of state and Commonwealth governments, that will set us back a decade. In the water sector most of all, there is a long history of dreams, plans and policy and institutional change – a “particularly restive water dreaming” as Powell (2000) has it – but not always evidence that this history is used to inform the future. In many areas, we are not utilising the potential of existing arrangements. Analysis across the local government sector by Su Wild River (forthcoming) shows such potential, and some positive directions that are consistently limited by both lack of resources and often inappropriate statutory settings imposed by the states.

Other preliminary findings from the LWRRDC project raise pertinent issues. Ewing (forthcoming) assesses the diversity of catchment organisations, a diversity that may be a strength or weakness. Different states have used different institutional models for varying reasons. The representativeness of catchment bodies, the appropriateness of their powers relative to their tasks, their ability to handle issues that are not determined hydrologically but rather socially, economically or ecologically, and their relationships with other scales of administration and management are rarely clear and require comparative analysis. John Dore et al. (forthcoming) draw lessons from the great range of regional initiatives, both past and present, and emphasise the key issues of the relationship to other institutional scales, human, informational and financial resources, and the likelihood of persistence given repeated past failures to implement region-based policy. Their analysis of the emerging Lake Eyre Basin arrangements, being consolidated through an intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), illustrates both the barriers to participatory, regional endeavours as well as the opportunities. An analysis of interjurisdictional arrange-
ments affirms the ability of MOU-type arrangements through the internationally remarkable set-up between Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory for management of the Australian Alps (Crabb, forthcoming). Crabb identifies less noticed yet positive and interesting institutional arrangements, such as those for the Border Rivers and Victoria and South Australia’s shared groundwater. Interestingly, such arrangements can work well in the absence of much community participation. The question of when to invest more or less in, respectively, community-based approaches and professional public sector management requires careful thought. The issue of participation is dealt with below. Regional and catchment arrangements are only one aspect of interjurisdictional resource management requiring coordination across governments, sectors and disciplines (see the section on consolidating the field, below).

Markets and collective endeavours

The past two decades have witnessed immense influence by neo-liberal political philosophies emphasising “market principles” over government intervention, with two important manifestations for NRM. Using market mechanisms is the first manifestation: tradeable permits, transferable water rights, individual transferable fishery quotas, salinity credits, incentive payments, and so on. The application of market instruments is predicated on two assumptions. The first is that they will lead to more efficient resource use through the assigning of correct prices to resources and the flexibility and adjustment potential offered to individuals and firms. The second is that other policy approaches – in particular “regulation” – have not succeeded. The assumption that regulatory approaches have “failed” has two weaknesses. First, it will often be the case that, on proper reflection, it is implementation that has failed rather than regulatory approaches per se. Second, portraying the law as being only about strict regulation is wrong: statute law also offers the prime means of shaping institutions, ensuring transparency and accountability, enabling public participation, and expressing guiding principles in a firm way (Dovers 1999a). Actually, the core assumption for many seems to be the simplistic political one that “markets are good”, but this is not testable whereas the two assumptions just stated allow some analysis. It will be crucial over the next few years to maintain a close watch on, and mount detailed analyses of, the operation of these rights markets, to ascertain whether they are in fact working in terms of these assumptions. Watched closely and improved as necessary, markets are opportunities – trusted with blind faith and unexamined, they may become barriers.

The second manifestation is closely related but subject to far less discussion: the “marketisation” of public policy processes, institutions and agency structures and functions (Dovers and Gullett 1999). Too loosely termed “economic rationalism” in Australia, marketisation comprises privatisation, corporatisation, contracting out of public services, downsizing, and the de-emphasis on sector-specific skills in favour of mastery of supposedly generic management skills (managerialism). Many sectors, including NRM, have seen a massive institutional and policy change. The COAG (Council of Australian Governments) water reforms are the most well known, but very few areas remain unaffected. Cullen et al. (2000) have examined the ecological implications in the water sector, and Christoff (forthcoming) provides a case study of public sector change through the example of environmental protection in Victoria.

Marketisation has both potentially positive and potentially negative implications for NRM. The positives revolve around efficiency in the delivery of services and use of resources. The possible negatives include loss of the day-to-day independence but long-term public accountability of the previous, more traditional statutory authority model. The ability of corporatised or privatised agencies and processes to engage in cross-landscape or catchment-wide approaches, cross-portfolio and sector management coordination, or to
allow for public participation, may also be affected. For all these, the statutory framework of institutional change is the key, both to ensure that such NRM considerations are catered for, and to allow later change if these public good aspects are not being properly addressed.

A particular concern is the state of long term ecological research and monitoring (LTERM), given “rationalisation” of staff and programs and the devaluation of specific skills. With respect to LTERM, it is not only government agencies that have been “marketised” but the research sector as well. Through cuts and pressures to attract outside funding, research institutions are meant to be more responsive to policy and industry needs. Whatever the merits of such a reorientation, there is the very real risk of diverting attention from or decreasing the attractiveness of longer term research. Near term goals and performance targets make long term research an act of career foolishness. Yet, if we are to understand natural systems and improve our capacity to manage them, long term experiments are vital. The chance of researchers engaging in long term environmental monitoring activities – which have never had much scientific or political kudos – are even lower again. Responsiveness to community needs may not coincide with responsiveness to the needs of industry and government. Long term investigations are inarguably necessary to comprehend and respond to issues such as dryland salinity, climate change and biodiversity loss – these issues have roots deep in the past and implication far into the future. Yet we have seen very basic elements of information infrastructure such as weather stations and stream gauges closed in the name of cost-cutting and rationalisation. Smith (forthcoming) explores the adequacy of monitoring in the water sector. And we have certainly not seen the investment in long term monitoring of, for example, weeds or native biota that these issues deserve or that policy statements have promised. Claims that improved inference capabilities through computer simulation and increased community monitoring programs make up for this loss may have basis, but have little empirical support. A review of the impact of marketisation and micro-economic reform on long term monitoring and information systems is urgently required.

Participation, trust and politics
There has been increasing interest over recent decades in political and critical theory in more inclusive, participatory ways of “doing” policy and politics, often expressed in opposition to the countervailing trends of marketisation and globalisation. More practically, a feature of Australian NRM over the past decade has been the growth in the number and range of community-based groups and programs: EverythingCare and EverythingWatch (Dovers 2000b). The most notable of these, Landcare, should perhaps not be thought of as “community-based” but rather small business based, as the great bulk of members are from family firms. Even given the fact that community-based approaches are not as “new” as some think (e.g. Pasture Protection Boards, River Improvement Trusts, etc.), this has been truly remarkable and represents a great opportunity for ongoing partnerships to evolve, connecting public policy and on-ground management. (I will use “landcare” as shorthand for the many groups and programs.) However, there are actual and potential barriers to this that could, if not attended, turn the landcare experiment from a potential turning point in the history of human settlement of this country, to a bitter disappointment and an unfulfilled dream:

• First, too much should not be expected of landcare – community-based, on-ground groups and programs are crucially important, but public participation in natural resource and environmental policy and management should be viewed as much broader. Voting, representation on statutory management boards, statutory rights to information and comment on developments and policy proposals, input into parliamentary or quasi-judicial inquiries, and so on – these are important also. In recent years there has been, in a
number of jurisdictions, a move away from public participation in policy at higher levels, toward closed process and the strictures of commercial-in-confidence. Public participation in policy processes has not always been used well or maintained properly. Mobb’s (forthcoming) analysis of the NSW Regional Forest Agreements process illustrates this, as does the failure to continue the ESD policy dialogue of the early 1990s (see also Dovers 1999b on the Australian ESD process). It is all too apparent that participatory democracy and modern political trends in Australia do not necessarily coincide, an issue discussed by Eckersley (forthcoming). We have some way to go in utilising the full range of opportunities for community participation in policy and management, choosing the best form in each context and assessing existing arrangements carefully before inventing wheels anew. For example, an arena for less partisan and reasonably inclusive political and policy debate with a good track record at times are parliamentary committees, especially in Australia’s Senate (Odgers, forthcoming). Not to fully use promising institutional avenues that already exist is foolish.

- Second, it is unclear how far the scarce resource of voluntary time and effort so essential to a community-based approach can stretch. On the basis of sustained empirical work, Curtis (forthcoming) has found evidence that volunteerism is reaching its limits already for many groups. His data on time commitments by members of Landcare groups are sobering. Especially important is the recognition of the administrative load laid upon landcarers by short term program finance procedures and lack of basic support. Having basic administrative and human resource capacity through a (probably shared) convener should not be viewed as a short term project.

- Third, frequent program changes can be enervating for community groups. Some volunteers have been climbing on and off endlessly reinvented programs for decades. Greater stability in arrangements – but still with flexibility to adapt to emerging demands – is called for.

- Fourth, emerging doubts over the genuineness of current moves to community-based approaches must be addressed. More and more people suspect that behind this move is an abrogation of government duty. Such a suspicion is supported by the decay of traditional government services (e.g. agronomic extension), and evidence of reduction in funding to existing resource management programs that has been possible behind the smokescreen of privatisation proceeds expended through Australia’s Natural Heritage Trust (NHT). The NHT is a short term public finance mechanism expending privatisation proceeds via many, small grants, rather than a long term institutional reform.

The obvious answer to these potential barriers to making the most of the opportunity presented by the tremendous community willingness to engage in sustainable resource management is to “institutionalise” participation. This does not mean rigidity, control or strict rules, but rather giving community-based groups and programs greater status and recognition through legal standing, and a better promise of longevity through longer term commitments by governments.

We have seen the political climate of resource and environmental policy change greatly in recent years. Communication technology, neo-liberal ideologies, advanced opinion polling and a rise of populism have seen sustainable resource management become a coin in the machine of PR politics. We have also seen a rising political mistrust and cynicism, and this is at its most intense in rural and regional Australia – the heartland of landcare. This situation represents a massive risk, one that will see the landcare experiment turn sour if the notion of “community empowerment” is used cynically or in a partisan manner by government. These cautionary comments regarding participation might be kept in mind as we watch the ongoing evolution of community-based NRM arrangements. Whether the rhetoric and record of achievement thus far will be backed by true empowerment, proper status,
long term commitment of resources, and a durable yet adaptable institutional framework remains to be seen.

Consolidating the field
There is no doubt that, compared to other policy fields, resources and environment are institutionally weak and fragmented. We lack the sort of coordinating and influential institutional arrangements that exist at the national level, for example, in or attached to core economic portfolios. Part of the reason is simple political priorities, which favour other, shorter term imperatives – ecologically sustainable development just isn’t up there yet. But there is a chicken-and-egg dimension to this. One way of heightening political priority is for the evidence and weight of policy expertise and arguments to be better coordinated and communicated – that can only occur through stronger institutions.

There are many suggestions for more cohesive and influential institutions (Dovers 1999b). Here, a few examples illustrate the point, especially when cited alongside an existing, comparable arrangement from another policy field. The examples are mostly at the national level, but the principles can be extended easily enough to the state level. Creation of Offices of ESD in first ministers’ departments, to coordinate policy across portfolios, was an ignored recommendation of Australia’s 1990–92 ESD process. Other cross-cutting issues, such as the arts or indigenous or women’s affairs, have similar status. An ESD R&D Corporation is justified, to fulfil the role that LWRRDC is currently undertaking bravely in a de facto fashion in the absence of properly coordinated and resourced efforts. The ESD process recommended an ESD research advisory council, which would go only part of the way. The National Health and Medical Research Council shows the potential of such arrangements. The benefits of coordination of basic information gathering and dissemination in a policy field are illustrated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The potential of a national, coordinating mechanism for training, information and coordinated policy development is well evidenced by the (Commonwealth funded) Australian Emergency Management Institute.

Resource and environmental management, and ESD more broadly, need capacity building along such lines. The current array of ministerial councils do not reflect the integrative nature of sustainability questions, with environment, resources and related issues scattered across councils – an overarching ministerial council could play a useful coordinating role. Last of all, there is definite scope for a National Commission for ESD, including three levels of government, industry and non-government representatives, and the relevant sciences (natural and social). That would do justice, at a high level, to the rhetoric of participation. Such a body should be enabled by statute to undertake state of environment reporting and other tasks, to develop policy recommendations, and advise on national priorities for R&D. The announcement in 2000 that the state of Victoria is to have a statutory office of Commissioner for Ecologically Sustainable Development is an encouraging development.

Conclusion
All the issues above are closely interrelated and should be dealt with accordingly. Populism and lack of trust are fed by Australia’s poor state of political literacy (Civics Expert Group 1994), but also by constant shifts and sleights-of-hand in government policies and programs. Greater long term clarity in resource commitment and in the responsibilities of different levels of government are needed. That will demand some thinking – and indeed acting – outside the square. Traditional institutional arrangements are inadequate and we are trying new approaches at different scales. Will these be supported, persisted with, adapted and improved, or will the latest initiative swiftly become the late initiative as has so often been the case in the past? The federal Opposition’s recent proposal to establish joint
Commonwealth-State funds for public health expenditure is the sort of fundamentally different approach we might need—a move toward transparent cooperation, making it harder to engage in the buck-passing that is all too easy in a federation. Why not in the resource management arena? Likewise, if regional and catchment scale arrangements are to survive and be effective—remembering that many in the past have had unnaturally short institutional lives—then we may have to entertain unprecedented statutory frameworks formulated jointly between the states and the Commonwealth, expressing genuine devolution of powers and responsibilities. The same goes for local and district-scale community based groups, both in terms of statutory recognition and the provision of resources not tied to one-off windfalls from privatisation proceeds. We may even have to entertain the imposition of legal obligations for good land management on land holders, both public and private. The Industry Commission (1998) proposed the creation of a widespread, statutory “duty of care”. That idea startles some people. Yet it merely resurrects similar notions of legal duties from Australia’s past, as demonstrated by Bradsen (2000) in the case of private landholders and soil conservation up until the 1930s, and Bonyhady (2000) in the case of governments and the doctrine of “public trust” last century. There is currently perhaps too much talk of property rights and not enough of responsibilities.

This paper has pointed to both negative and positive possible futures. The institutional remedies suggested are but a sample, but they illustrate the required direction. Whether such innovative, genuine and cooperative moves are possible remains to be seen. Will we face barriers or opportunities? That will be a matter of choice, not of accident.

References


