

Developing and implementing a regional weed management strategy through a community engagement and education process

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Summary The Katherine Region of the Northern Territory covers approximately 386,350 km² stretching from Queensland to the WA borders. The region comprises of a diverse range of land tenures and land users. Environmental and agricultural weeds have significantly impacted the environmental, economic and cultural values of the landscape.

A decision to develop a regional weed management strategy was made in 2003. The task of developing an effective weeds strategy which engaged the community and delivered practical on ground outcomes proved to be a challenge. The primary mechanism for developing and implementing this strategy was through an effective communication plan.

The strategy provided the link between National, Territory and regional strategies and plans. Enhanced education and awareness of key stakeholders were identified as being a key objective of the strategy and integral to successful implementation. To support the culture shift of incorporating weed awareness into all aspects of management and to promote ongoing community involvement, a suite of education and awareness materials have been produced since the introduction of the strategy.

Keywords Weed, strategy, community engagement, education, implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The Katherine Regional Weed Management Strategy and Action Plan 2005–2010 (Katherine Regional Weed Advisory Committee 2005) is a document which identifies, prioritises and sets regional objectives for the management of weed issues across the Katherine region. The strategy links individual property plans, catchment management plans and weed management plans in the region to provide a regional focus for all stakeholders. This strategy encourages directing resources to the key areas where it can achieve the best value for investment. It provides a ‘big picture’ of what is happening in surrounding areas so land managers can strategically channel their weed management efforts to ensure maximum and longer term returns.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Katherine Regional Weeds Advisory Committee, established under the *NT Weeds Management Act 2001*, provided impetus and direction for the development of the strategy. The task of writing up the document given to the Weed Management Branch of the Northern Territory Government, Department of Natural Resources, Environment and The Arts (NRETA). Development of the strategy began in July 2003. The completed document was launched in September 2005.

Strategy development There were seven main steps involved in developing the strategy, these included:

Step 1: Developing a strategy framework. The strategy was built upon defined principles as well as consideration of legislation, and relevant Northern Territory and national documents.

Step 2: Collecting and collating background information. There were 26 documents relating to weed management for the Katherine region, mostly in draft form. From these documents, the themes for the strategy were identified. The community consultation process was very streamlined and well supported because of the previous work that had been done. The stakeholders did not feel they had been ‘over consulted’.

Step 3: Consulting stakeholders. Over 30 key stakeholder groups who owned or were responsible for weed management on land within the Katherine Region attended a workshop. Attendees included representatives from Government, local government, community councils, Indigenous land management organisations and trusts, industry groups and community groups. With the assistance of a facilitator, the workshop had a number of focuses including: a review of weed management from 1990–2003; finalising and obtaining consensus on the strategy framework; deciding how the workshop group will develop and implement the strategy; and developing the content for the document (including a timeline and identifying roles and responsibilities);

Step 4: Writing the draft strategy. The key contents for the strategy included:

- a long term vision (what we will achieve in 20 years),
- background information (including a historic timeline of weed management within the region),
- purpose of the strategy (including who is responsible for managing weeds within the region),
- tracking our progress through the development of an action plan (eight key objectives identified), and
- a communication strategy.

Step 5: Consulting again with stakeholders. The draft was circulated to all stakeholder groups involved in the workshop. A questionnaire seeking comment on the content and clarity of the strategy document was included, with feedback over a three-month period.

Step 6: Collating results, review and final draft prepared.

Step 7: The strategy was launched and implementation commenced.

Strategy implementation Strategies were distributed to all key stakeholder groups within the region in hard copy. CD ROM and internet versions of the strategy and action plan have been made available to members of the public free of charge. The strategy has become a valuable tool for the NT Natural Resource Management Board and National Weeds of National Significance management groups for the assessment of funding applications for the region.

A communication strategy was developed for each strategy objective to ensure coordinated, timely and relevant information is distributed to the community and industry for the management of weeds in the Katherine region.

RESULTS

Through public consultation with key stakeholder groups and use of existing documents, the strategy identified incentives (including spray equipment loans) and gaps in knowledge and information.

The strategy has an operational focus through the development of the action plans. These plans were identified by the stakeholders as an essential element to ensure the strategy was implemented.

The strategy better informs the Katherine Regional Weed Advisory Committee when making decisions and recommendations. The NT Natural Resource Management Board also uses the strategy to assist with the assessment of project applications through the Regional Investment Strategy.

The strategy has resulted in the production of a suite of education and awareness materials. This has included: the Katherine Region Weed ID Deck (Katherine Regional Weed Advisory Committee (2007)); NT Weed Control Handbook (Draft); Katherine Regional

Weeds Poster; and the NT wide 'Weed All About It' Newsletter.

Other successful results from the strategy include the development of partnerships between government and community groups working together, including the Roper River Landcare Group and Victoria River District Conservation Association. Meetings have been organised to identify regional projects and seek funding through various funding sources. A weed control equipment loan program (including Quikspray units) for community groups and individuals has been established in Katherine, Timber Creek and Borroloola. Across the NT, Northern Territory Weed Data Collection Guidelines and NT weed risk assessment process for the review of the NT Declared Weeds list were triggered as a result of this strategy.

DISCUSSION

This document links directly to the Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan for the Northern Territory to ensure land managers are meeting objectives at a catchment, regional and Territory wide level.

The strategy and action plan identifies opportunities for project development and encourage the development of catchment-wide, cross-tenure and cross-border partnerships. The strategy outlines where current resources are being invested and identifies areas where further investment is required. The strategy encourages the development of incentives and recognises weed management works already undertaken over the years by many hard working individuals, Landcare groups and land managers. Milestones are provided to track the progress of the plan and ensure that stakeholders are kept informed of strategic progress and what is happening across the region.

The strategy has provided a focus and direction for the Katherine Region which has resulted in a significant increase in coordination and management of on-ground weed control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, Environment and The Arts would like to acknowledge the contributions made by the Katherine Regional Weed Advisory Committee, industry groups, community groups and land managers in the development and implementation of the strategy.

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