

Ridgeline – ARC Protected Area Management Research Report

December 2006

Preamble

This newsletter is the first of what we hope will be a regular communication mechanism for the partner organisations involved in the ARC project titled “*Building capacity for adaptive management in protected areas through improved systems for monitoring and evaluation*”.

The ARC project partners include:

- ❖ Parks Victoria
- ❖ NSW Department of Environment and Conservation
- ❖ Director of National Parks
- ❖ Department of Environment and Heritage (Parks Australia)

The aim of the project is to improve State of the Parks (SoP) assessment and reporting and the apply the findings from monitoring and evaluation to improve protected area management. Four key objectives guide the research:

1. Examine the factors that impact on management effectiveness (*Josie Kelman (PhD candidate) and Grant Wardell-Johnson*).
2. Assess the reliability of the SoP evaluation instrument and recommend improvements to it (*Carly Cook, PhD candidate*).
3. Develop and test procedures for integrating SoP information in to decision making at multiple organisational scales (*Chris Jacobson, Marc Hockings and Bill Carter*).

4. Share findings and incorporate others’ examples of best practice in protected areas evaluation (*Marc Hockings, Chris Jacobson and Bill Carter*).

Our research approach is inherently collaborative. The purpose of this newsletter is to contribute to continued open communication with our project partners and other interested stakeholders.

The year in brief

Progress has been a little slower that expected in 2006. After final signing of the research agreement in late May, the university was able to create, advertise and fill the Postdoctoral Research Fellow and PhD scholarship positions. Carly Cook and Josie Kelman have been awarded PhD scholarships with this project (commencing in June and September, respectively) and Chris Jacobson has been appointed as the Postdoctoral Research Fellow, commencing in November. We now have a full team on-board.

In August, the partners met in Brisbane to discuss the research further. It was agreed at this meeting that project plans would be developed for each objective as soon as possible to allow coordination of the research projects with existing programs within each of the partner organisations.

Marc and Chris attended the Heads of Agencies meeting in November, and were able to get a feel for the systems other states and territories were using for evaluating park management effectiveness. We also met with the Australian Bush Heritage Trust (ABHT) to discuss research on evaluating park management and the use of this information. Marc has been appointed to the ABHT steering committee.

Also in November, Carly, Josie and Chris headed off on a two-week road-tour to visit Parks Victoria and NSW DEC Parks and Wildlife Service staff at both central and regional offices. A key outcome of this was that we agreed to provide feedback to partners on emerging issues and research directions.



Meeting with Parks Victoria staff.

November road-tour

The November road-tour served a number of purposes. It provided an opportunity to meet staff from a range of different roles in the partner organisations, to give them background on the project and progress made so far, and to give us a greater understanding of their institutional and managerial context. In addition, each of us had specific things that we wanted to get out of the trip.

For Chris, the road-tour provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of institutional structure and the decision making context of the organisations at different levels. This information was useful for giving context and for developing methods for objective three (using evaluation information in decision-making).

Potential issues that will contribute to the development of more detailed research directions for objective three include:

1. How SoP information can be used to support decision-making processes operating at different levels in partner organisations, e.g.:
 - ❖ in developing and reviewing plans of management
 - ❖ in operationalising plans of management
 - ❖ in making decisions relating to prioritising management activities
 - ❖ in conjunction with existing decision support initiatives
2. Ways in which SoP data can contribute to the differing informational and reporting requirements that exist within different park governance structures.
3. Exploring factors that support and limit the ability of SoP indicators to be easily aggregated to meet reporting needs but yet have sufficient depth to support park-level decision-making.

For Josie, the road trip provided an opportunity to familiarise herself with the different operational environments of the partner organisations. It was also an opportunity to meet staff and discover what avenues of research are currently underway in-house and with other partner organisations. It was particularly helpful to be able to present the initial exploratory analysis and to sound staff out about those findings and the future directions for her thesis.

Potential directions identified for further inquiry include:

1. How Plans of Management influence effectiveness, especially:
 - ❖ The value of the planning process in contributing to greater understanding internally
 - ❖ The value of the process in the engagement of stakeholders
 - ❖ The success of communicating policy directions to on-ground action
2. The influence of the operating environment for a park in terms of demography and visitation and how they impact on management effectiveness.
3. The influence of corporate memory loss on effectiveness.



David Phillips, Helen Halliday and Bruce Wellington discuss their vision for the project.

For Carly, the road trip was a great opportunity to update the partner organisations about progress in refining her research questions and methods. The partner organisations provided valuable feedback to ensure that the research questions will result in useful information about the validity of State of the Parks data.

Some key outcomes of the discussion with the partners included:

1. A list of key data sources from each partner organisation that may contribute to validating SoP assessments
2. A request (from NSW DEC) for assurances about ethical and privacy considerations
3. Valuable preliminary information from regional staff who participated in the respective data standardisation procedures
4. Key contacts to approach for further information
5. Good feedback on issues surrounding the on-ground validation component of the study
6. An understanding of internal processes within the partner organisations that may contribute to validation of additional aspects of the survey

We would all like to say a special thanks to all the people who contributed their time and perspectives to what we feel was an incredibly valuable exercise.



Martin Fortescue with a Little Penguin at Bowen Island, Booderee National Park.

Additional follow up

During our meetings, we were given access to many documents that are valuable for our analyses and understanding. We will be in contact with each agency individually to follow-up on some of this information.

Our agenda for the next year

What follows is a heads up on our plans for 2006.

1st six months:

- ❖ PhD confirmation (Carly)
- ❖ Survey/meetings on ambiguous terms in SoP assessments
- ❖ Detailed proposal for objective three finalised and circulated for comment
- ❖ Parks Australia Forum
- ❖ PhD confirmation (Josie)
- ❖ Survey on goals for use of SoP information

2nd six months:

- ❖ Analysis of improved systems and processes for conducting SoP assessments (including paper for submission)
- ❖ Report on initial ground-truthing of results from SoP
- ❖ Detailed analysis of NSW SoP dataset (2003 & 2004)
- ❖ Multi-variate analysis of Parks Victoria SoP dataset
- ❖ Paper on issues in aggregating SoP reporting

Agreed communication mechanisms

During our November visits, we discussed the potential for regular updates (every 2-3 months) with partners, either by tele-conferencing or video-conferencing. We will advise of dates for these in the New Year.

If you have any ideas about how communication could be improved, please let us know - just email Chris.

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We look forward to seeing you all in the new year - Merry Christmas everyone!