

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Importance of the community to the VRHS

Any improvement in the condition of Victoria's rivers can only occur if regional communities are fully engaged and committed to this as a long-term objective. This is because the decisions that will be made by the community about management of river systems ultimately affect community livelihoods and quality of life.

Underpinning the policies described in the VRHS is the recognition that the community make decisions about river protection and restoration which will balance economic, social and environmental imperatives, and that these decisions need to be based on a good understanding of how rivers work and what is important ecologically.

To ensure positive involvement by the community, which is essential in achieving the outcomes of the VRHS, the community engagement processes must be carefully developed and targeted. Community engagement must:

- be needs driven;
- be focused at the appropriate level; and
- be accessible to all members of a community.

The main issues

Communities have a number of roles in the implementation of the VRHS:

- community members will be encouraged to participate in regional river health planning, priority setting and the implementation of works programs related to river management and restoration;
- they are encouraged to participate in community groups and networks, such as Landcare and Waterwatch, aimed at undertaking restoration projects and/or monitoring river health within the context of the regional River Health Strategy; and
- individuals will be relied on to manage their own enterprises in ways that acknowledge their 'duty of care' and their role as stewards of natural resources.

In order to fulfil these roles, it is important that community members are able to build on and enhance local and existing knowledge, skills and resources. Underpinning this is community confidence, willingness and ability to participate in planning and implementation processes.

To maximise community knowledge and understanding and ultimately to encourage increased input into decision-making processes and participation in on-ground activities, a number of key elements must be considered:

- **Institutional arrangements to support community engagement** – without clearly defined processes for community engagement and participation, community concerns and effort may be piecemeal, misdirected or, at the extreme, ignored.
- **Data and information** – the community has a valuable role to play in the collection of data and information, but also must have access to data and information collected by agencies or other stakeholder groups in order to make fully informed decisions.

- **Skills and training** – access to information and data to inform decision making and clearly defined stakeholder engagement processes facilitate community involvement to a certain point. Community engagement can be greatly enhanced when participants have the skills and capacity to take on a more ‘hands-on’ role. This allows for greater involvement in action planning and implementation and can also give plans longevity, by creating a greater sense of community ownership and stewardship.
- **Resources** – access to resources, whether it be a water quality database, advice from an extension officer or access to financial assistance for particular natural resource management activities, such as weed eradication, can facilitate, or in its absence hinder, stakeholder capacity to participate in natural resource management planning and implementation processes. Therefore, it is important that community members have a clear understanding of the role of stakeholders in catchment management and the services, information or skills that a given group may contribute.

To enhance community engagement and capacity building the VRHS:

- Establishes the framework and processes for community participation in river restoration and management.
- Supports and facilitates the provision of data to the community to assist in their effective participation in regional planning processes.
- Recognises the value which the community provides through collecting environmental data.
- Outlines areas for ongoing skill development and capacity building in both the community and the river management industry.