



ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL  
SCIENCES IN AUSTRALIA

## RE-IMAGINING ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE WORKSHOP

### Post Workshop Report

On 17-18 October 2013 the College of Arts at Victoria University hosted an important and timely workshop on *Re-Imagining Environmental Governance*. The workshop was held at the Victoria University City Flinders Campus and was funded by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, with support funding from Victoria University. Dr Deirdre Wilcock, Dr Chris McConville, Associate Professor Julie Stephens and Dr Colin Higgins (Deakin University formerly of Victoria University) co-ordinated the workshop, with support from the Vice-Chancellor's Office, Victoria University.

The workshop brought together a diverse, interdisciplinary group of scholars, public sector decision-makers and policy analysts from around Australia, to discuss alternative visions of environmental decision-making and public engagement and negotiation around environmental issues. The agencies represented here included joint university-government centres and state agencies. The major policy making input came from participants working in or with experience of working in Federal agencies. A Yorta Yorta Aboriginal representative also participated. This interdisciplinary and cross-sector group provided both a theoretically and practically grounded discussion and was particularly important in that it allowed dialogue between scholars from disciplines typically engaged with climate science and environmental management, (natural resource management, environmental policy studies, economics and law) and others with backgrounds in the practice of environmental decision-making. Here we refer especially to the disciplines of sociology, geography, anthropology, cultural studies, and environmental history – generally understood as environmental humanities. Of the nineteen participants that attended, five were early career researchers. With environmental management at the level of the Commonwealth in a current state of flux, this engagement across a broad range of disciplines and between academic researchers and practitioners was critically valuable.

The workshop took as its starting point the transition in environmental governance initiated by the change of government and policy direction following the 2013 Federal election. Two panel sessions on day one explored the direction environmental governance was taking (or was expected to take), and also the challenges and trajectories for change. The second panel introduced a defined list of themes to direct discussion, ranging from principles and criteria needed for effective environmental governance, to solid steps about how these changes would be implemented in practice.

On the afternoon of day one, the group split into various issue-specific groups for discussion; specifically, urban issues, public participation, and nature/culture. Day one concluded with a key note dinner presentation from Professor Ross Garnaut in which future prospects for emissions trading and the reduction of global warming were discussed. His experience in light of the public-policy processes contributed an added dimension to the focus of the workshop. A general discussion of the political-economy dimensions of climate change ensued and a range of suggestions regarding policymaking and future frameworks were considered.

Day two of the workshop focused on eliciting convergences and divergences of understanding between the participants in this interdisciplinary challenge of moving the social sciences forward in environmental governance. Several salient issues emerged, including:

- The need to identify and articulate the multitude of ways in which 'governance' occurs – ranging from formal government arrangements to the everyday practices of groups in multi-scalar spaces and times and incorporating new social technologies that could enable greater public participation and

engagement. Alternative visions of place-based engagement emerged that moved beyond a participative framework and towards a shared understanding of linking people and places. This approach was progressive in that experiences of this occurring were shared and links made. This learning was a significant outcome of the workshop.

- The significance of the social sciences in the wider societal context of environmental governance and climate change discourse was examined. The social sciences offer unique ways of both theorising and acting in these debates that can provide new avenues to tell people's stories of what they see as "environment" (or 'propelling new stories') and governance in ways other than traditional governmental channels. The social sciences also has much to offer in reconceiving of the ways governance institutions are designed and (can be) transformed.

Inevitably with such a diverse group, a range of governance issues and challenges were identified. While not necessarily the views and priorities of all participants, these included:

- A solid foundation for *effective* governance involves three criteria of: responsibility, authority and capacity. For instance, a governmental agency would need to be clear in its authority to make decisions, and assume responsibility if the actions did not work as planned, the agency would need to be held accountable. In order to fulfil this, an agency requires adequate capacity to enact the changes, adequate funding to be able to enable the required tasks as well as being accountable for consequences for actions if managed ineffectively. However, overlaps and complexities in current governance arrangements mean that much of this accountability is lost within and between the many elements in the overall governance "system".
- The complexity of the terms 'governance' and 'government' using the example of river catchments was discussed and the difficulty of making consistent the mesh of overlapping jurisdictions (including accountability and responsibility for decision-making) was explored. The significance of Native Title processes was also discussed in this regard.
- Several examples of major governance issues were discussed including the issue of water rights in the Murray-Darling Basin. It was generally considered that seeing social sciences and humanities, as an "add-on" to environmental science, was not the best way to secure good workable outcomes.
- Tensions were explained by a law expert regarding freehold land ownership and Crown claims on mineral resources beneath the land by using coal seam gas as a current example. This was a starting point for an analysis of social movements' engagement in reaction to CSG exploration, changing state-level structures surrounding exploration and questions of stakeholder engagement.
- It was argued that current environmental governance does not have an adequate sense of how particular knowledges and places are privileged and viewed as credible in particular governance systems, while others are marginalised. As such, the multitude of agencies often work with implicit assumptions, for example with ideologies of traditional separations of nature and culture. Despite this being well trodden terrain, envisioning alternative processes that involved a connected view of nature/culture as well as other progressive foundations, and their implications, were discussed.
- While land management in Australia is constitutionally vested in the states, local community groups have taken action in environmental issues that have potential to form a solid basis of experience for providing 'success stories' to be built upon.
- There is a need to move beyond technocentric solutions to improving governance. This is not possible without interrogating questions of function, purpose and effectiveness. The group considered more imaginative citizen-centred and deliberative processes of governance design that take account of the need to understand where the 'issues' lie.
- A significant repositioning of the process of 'governance' was explored that involved knowledge production that draws upon local knowledges and engagements for place sustainability.

In terms of future research, the group decided to link the participants as a starting point for a new Research Network on Environmental Governance. The network would meet again in six months time. A number of potential research projects, which would have a cross-disciplinary basis, were explored and workshop participants were interested in engaging in these in the future. Some projects included:

- Coal Seam Gas Exploration
- Urban expansion and possible new ways of governing outer suburbs (and “seachange” regional areas) for environmental and social goals.
- How to better engage with Indigenous environmental knowledge systems in science and public policy decision-making
- Analysis of decision-making structures at local, regional, state and Federal levels, and their engagement with social movements and corporate agencies, especially those with strong environmental actions. These were discussed within the context of both ARC Discovery and Linkage grants.

As a starting point for this ongoing research the group was invited to produce a social sciences edition of Australian River Restoration Centre journal *RipRap*.

Testimony to the success of the workshop was that participants were keen to establish this ongoing research network and to meet again. The network was provisionally called the *Flinders Group*, after the City Flinders Campus where the workshop was held.

In summary, the workshop brought together participants, many of whom did not previously know each other from a wide range of disciplines and roles and provided ways of rethinking current debates and providing a sense of collective hope and motivation around these issues that would not have been possible without the support of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

**Dr. Deirdre Wilcock, Dr. Colin Higgins, Dr. Julie Stephens, and Dr. Chris McConville (Convenors of the ASSA workshop ‘Reimagining Environmental Governance’, October, 2013).**