

The Role of a Professional Association

John Senior

ABSTRACT

The River Basin Management Society is a unique organisation offering an independent multi-disciplinary forum for integrated catchment management in Australia. No other body has attempted (let alone succeeded) to bring together the whole spectrum of professional and community interests involved in catchment management.

The paper outlines the techniques and approaches successfully used by the RBMS to bring varied interests together, to broaden understanding, to seek resolution of apparent conflicts, to facilitate outcomes, to generate change and to stimulate thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

From a modest beginning at Sale in eastern Victoria late in 1984, where it was conceived, the River Basin Management Society has evolved into a diverse yet cohesive group exceeding 300 in membership.

After a formative period of two years the Society was officially born on 26 November 1986 and incorporated a short time later.

The Society's aim remains "to facilitate communication between the many and varied disciplines and interests involved in river basin management, for the benefit of the community".

2. PHILOSOPHY

The guiding principles on which the RBMS operates are based on independence, affordability and responsiveness.

Membership is restricted to individuals in order that the Society remains free to comment on the activities of authorities and organisations without embarrassment or prejudice. Corporate support is welcomed through patronage or sponsorship.

Recognising that many potential members already belong to a single discipline body the policy has been to maintain a modest scale of fees and subscriptions.

As advocates of a co-operative approach rather than a specific industry, the RBMS has less need to provide for formal professional development and representation.

Particular emphasis has been placed on providing "value for money". Member surveys (regularly conducted as part of seminar gatherings) have been used to identify topics for conferences, ideas for new initiatives and to indicate levels of satisfaction with:

- newsletter frequency, style and content
- seminar and subscription costs
- the way in which particular Society projects are being handled
- member services generally

3. MEMBERSHIP

Since its inception the RBMS has grown intermittently to its present level of just over 300 (Figure 1), spread across all states. What is particularly rewarding is the substantial increase in the last three years. This represents the attraction of a wider audience to the twice-yearly Seminars and indicates an increasing awareness of, and value placed on, the Society's endeavours.

The range of member backgrounds continues to widen whilst understandably dominated by science and engineering interests. Membership contains a good balance between academics and practitioners, and between public and private sector backgrounds. The amount of other interests is encouraging (Figure 2). It is vital that overall membership and conference delegates are representative of the wider community if integrated understanding is to be achieved. It is also pleasing to see improving student involvement and a growing proportion of female participants.

The RBMS is managed by a Committee of ten, elected annually. This arrangement enables the continual introduction of "new blood" whilst allowing for continuity. It has provided regular opportunity for members to show their satisfaction with general administration through nomination and at the ballot box.

President, River Basin Management Society, 425 Porter Street, Templestowe, Victoria 3106
Telephone: Bus. (03) 9816 6857 Home (03) 9846 4749 Fax (03) 9816 6898

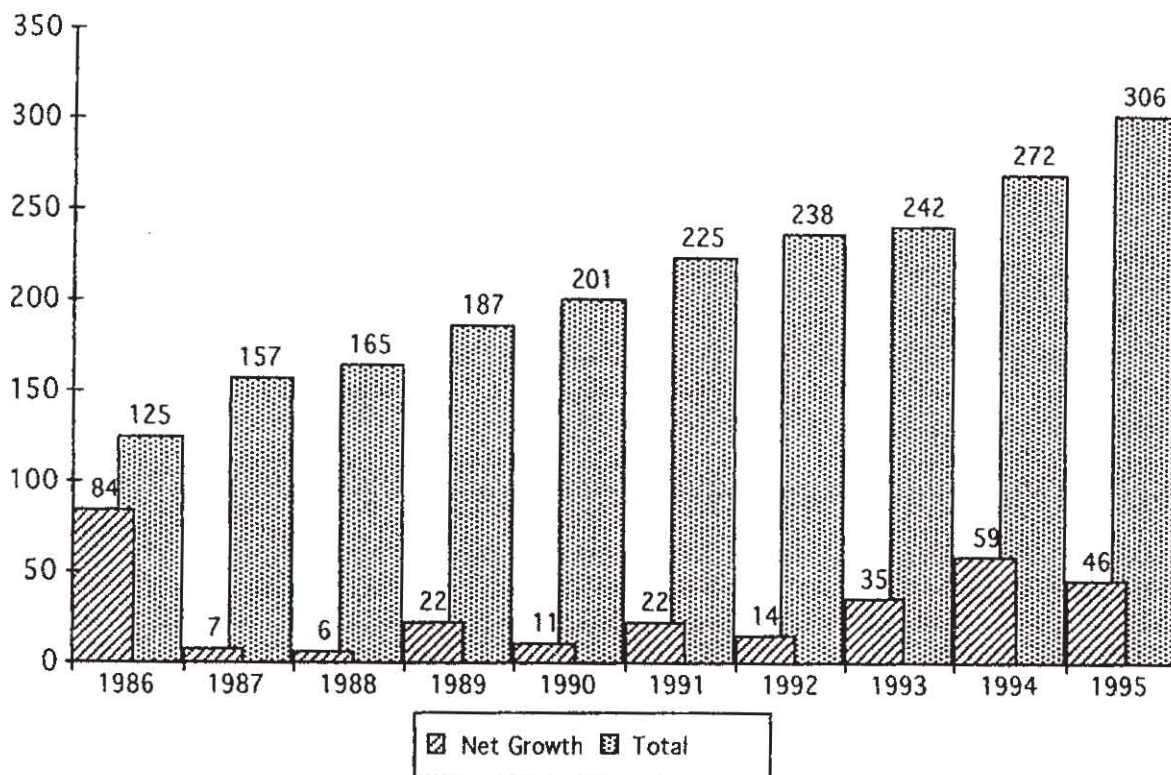


Figure 1 Net Growth per year & Net Membership

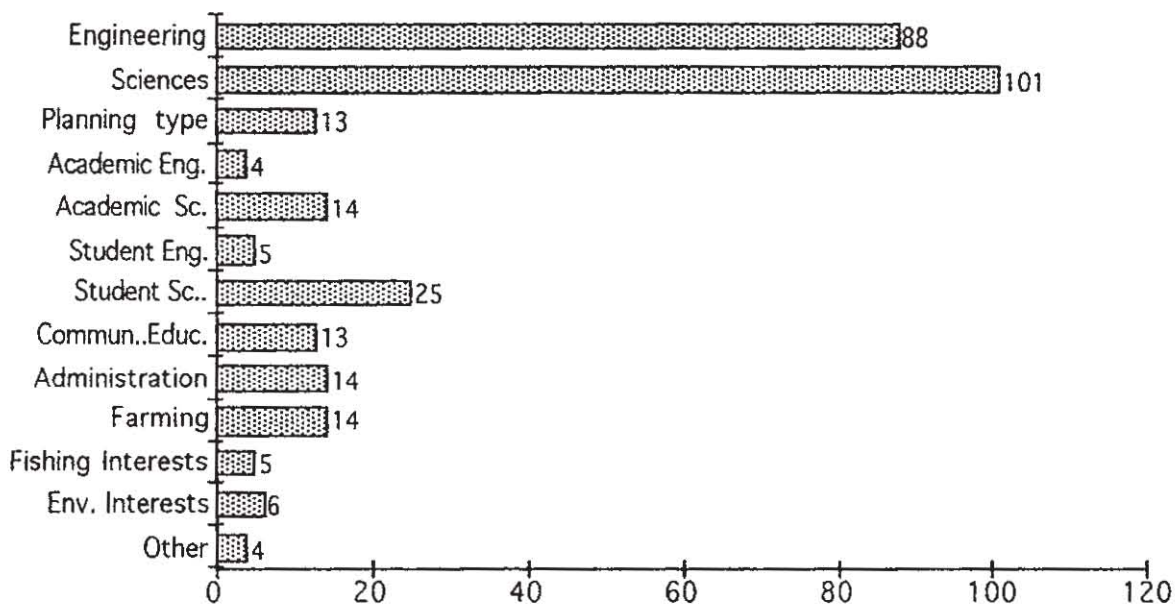


Figure 2 Current Membership X training

4. FINANCIAL

As indicated earlier, subscription levels have been held to the minimum (Figure 3). This has only been achieved by a combination of initiatives. Voluntary help is fundamental to any such body and the amount of such effort is a reflection of the strength of member commitment to the Society's aims and objectives. The Society has obtained a tax deductible status for fees and subscriptions.

In-kind support received from key agencies to enable basic administration to occur and to provide small financial assistance with newsletter printing is indicative of common goals and principles. The current trend towards more commercial (business) approaches in traditional public sector organisations means such sources can no longer be relied upon. Indeed the future credibility of the RBMS will be dependent on it demonstrating a more responsible, "professional" approach itself.

Major sponsorship sought from government bodies has facilitated the organisation of a number of seminars of special value to those agencies. It has been a case of making and taking opportunities that present themselves. To do so necessitates the need for forward thinking and strategic positioning. For most events, to minimise costs, support is sought mainly from government bodies with local commercial companies often assisting in a range of minor ways particularly for non-metropolitan venues.

Additionally a small number of opportunities for "consultancy" assignments have arisen where agencies have valued the unique "collective wisdom" that the RBMS can offer. In a small budget base these assignments have brought in useful income. By voluntary resourcing through retired members at minimal actual cost quite significant income can be derived. This will not always be possible, it depends on personal sacrifices, a strong belief in the project and the need for additional support whenever required.

Presently the RBMS has an annual operating budget of almost \$50,000, with cash and invested reserves of over \$60,000. Wise investment of surplus funds has been carefully pursued.

5. ACTIVITIES

Since 1990 a major commitment to establishing and maintaining student research grants has been made. Now entitled the "Ernest Jackson Memorial Research Grants" (after "Watershed" Jackson, often viewed as the father of total catchment management) over \$20,000 has been awarded to 25

recipients in four states. This approximates to 60% of income received through member subscriptions in the same period!

A smart, simple, regular and informative newsletter keeps members abreast of current issues and developments, and is highly rated by members.

Topics for the twice yearly, one/two day seminars have ranged from the general to the specific, from technical and scientific knowledge to community expectations, from legal and institutional aspects to cost benefits (Appendix). Many have included workshop sessions and site visits to involve participants and improve understanding at first hand. Proceedings of all seminars are provided free to delegates and are generally available for purchase at a small cost. Attendance is usually evenly split between members and non-members. A major value, consistently highlighted in seminar survey evaluations, is the networking opportunity at and following the events themselves. In programming each event every effort is made to facilitate such opportunities.

Occasional evening seminars are arranged to take advantage of visiting experts and to enable grant recipients to present the outcomes of their research.

More recently the RBMS has sponsored member presentations to, or attendance at, conferences of significance. These initiatives promote further awareness of and respect for the Society and provide a "promotional" opportunity.

The perceived credibility and independence of the RBMS are the reasons why it is often invited by government bodies to:

- conduct seminars to add value to draft policies or guidelines
- undertake paid consultancy assignments to provide to strategy development
- participate on consultative committees to provide advice and comment on draft strategies
- review draft reports.
- act as an "honest broker" with other interest groups

Involvement in these activities is resourced through the wide base of member experience and knowledge (Ref.).

The RBMS is also represented on the industry steering committee advising the East Gippsland College of TAFE on the re-accreditation of Resource Management Diploma and Advanced Certificate courses.

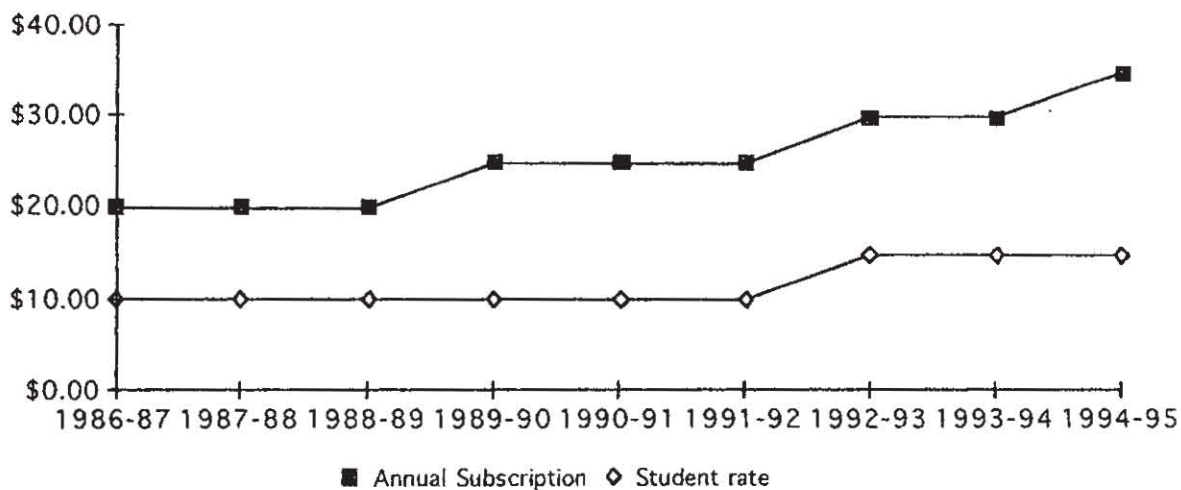


Figure 3 RBMS Annual Subscription Rates

Information on Research Grants

First Made in 1990 year -
 Since that time Grants of \$21,425 have been made with a current provision for this year of another \$7000 .
 These have made to 25 recipients in: 4 states (Vic.;S.A.;N.S.W; & W.A.) and the A.C.T.
 During this period the revenue from annual Subscriptions has been approximately \$33,000.

6. SPECIAL PROJECTS

6.1 Catchment & Land Protection

The established reputation of the RBMS was the reason why it was invited by the Victorian Department of Conservation & Natural Resources to participate in the consultation process for the development of inaugural Catchment and Land Protection legislation. In particular, it was asked to organise a two-day Seminar in November 1993 as part of that process. This highly successful event attracted 159 delegates including a number from inter-state.

Subsequently the RBMS prepared a booklet "Catchment & Land Protection - Ideas to Make it Work" (Ref.) as its contribution to the induction program for members of the ten new Regional Catchment & Land Protection Boards established by the legislation. Whilst particularly aimed at this audience, the principles and ideas it contains are by no means limited to the Victorian scene and have much wider application. The booklet is available for purchase.

A complementary initiative has been to offer to conduct associated presentations to the Boards and other relevant groups on a fee for service basis.

6.2 Melbourne's Sewerage Strategy

A further example of the esteem in which the RBMS is held is the consultant role it has played with Melbourne Water Corporation. Under this arrangement it has contributed to the development of a "Sewerage Strategy" for the greater Melbourne area. The constructive technical input and "honest broker" role that has been provided over the three and half year period of its involvement to date has further enhanced the Society's standing.

7. FUTURE

The RBMS is now at a stage of growth and evolution that require alternative solutions to increasing administrative needs. Accordingly a bid has been made for Federal funding under the "Program of Grants to Voluntary Conservation Organisations" to assist with operating costs.

As part of special initiatives to recognise its imminent 10th anniversary, the Society is exploring the potential to establish a Foundation to provide surety and greater levels of funding for the research grants program.

8. CONCLUSION

The professional approach adopted to address the latent need for "bridging gaps" between different disciplines and other interest has proved an outstanding success. It is evident that the unique role played by the RBMS in the field of integrated catchment management is one that is becoming increasingly relevant to both individuals and authorities.

The RBMS experience is an example to all who seek to bridge similar gaps.

9. REFERENCES

River Basin Management Society (1994) Member Profiles

River Basin Management Society (1995) Catchment & Land Protection - Ideas to Make it Work

10. APPENDIX: RBMS CONFERENCES

Mining: instream and on the floodplain (May 1986)

Land & Water Interaction (December 1986)

Legislative Changes/Practical problems & conflicts (May 1987)

Victoria's Northern Rivers - working together to restore a balance (November 1987)

Protecting the Instream Environment (April 1988)

Impacts of Stream Management: a review of guidelines for river management works (October 1988)

River Basin Managers - Education and Research (April 1989)

Revive our River - the Wimmera: the next step (October 1989)

Management of Floodplains - Everyone has a role (May 1990)

Costs & Benefits of River Basin Management (November 1990)

River Frontage Management (November 1991)

Multifunctional Water Authorities - Rewards & Risks (May 1992)

Managing Urban Streams to meet Community Expectations (November 1992)

The Inter-relationship between Land Use and Stream Condition (April 1993)

Legislating for Catchment Management: successful consultation = successful legislation (November 1993)

Waterways and Catchments: Research and its Application (May 1994)

Back to Basics: Geomorphology & Biology of Streams (November 1994)

Algal & Waterway Management - Problems & Solutions (May 1995)

Back to Basics: Weeds & Fish in Riparian Zones (November 1995)

