

Why and how to track co-benefits or social and cultural outcomes

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Key Points

- To earn and maintain the social licence to manage natural resources, our communities must care about the outcomes we target.
- Managers will increasingly need to focus on maximising co-benefits benefits, together with recognising and reporting these shared outcomes.
- Indicators are being developed that demonstrate tangible social and cultural outcomes of meaning to the community and other key stakeholders.

Abstract

Healthy waterways underpin a healthy society and culture. It is vital that managers can convincingly communicate the connected social and cultural benefits in order to build the case for waterway care and investment. In recent years the approach has evolved, however more needs to be done to advance from concepts to evidence of tangible outcomes.

Waterway managers often undersell the work they do by not having the information required to persuasively explain the shared benefits that they deliver over time – specifically the social and cultural outcomes healthy waterways provide to communities. Through various projects, I've contributed to helping practitioners better understand, support and account for recreational and Aboriginal water values. This includes scoping the socio-economic benefits of delivering environmental outcomes for Victoria's waterways; generating a series of case studies illustrating the spectrum of ecosystem services which flow from waterway management activities; and trialling quantitative indicators for tracking the social and cultural outcomes of waterway works, for use in long-term MERI planning and performance reporting.

This paper reflects on personal and professional insights gleaned from consulting on co-benefit reporting.

Keywords

Co-benefits, social, cultural, outcomes, tracking, reporting, communication

Introduction

To earn and maintain the social licence to manage natural resources, our communities must care about the outcomes we chase. Why? Because if it matters to people, we will generate our greatest impact. Because if it matters to people, we can work together to build resilience. Because if it matters to people, our industry and our communities will survive and thrive.

In my early career I imagined we could get people to care by specifying the ecological values of a place and the threats to those values. Surely if the significant biodiversity of a place was explained, the funding would be found to conserve precious ecosystems? Yet as we've documented species, ecological communities and threatening processes, it has become increasingly difficult to generate funding for NRM. At the same time we are faced with growing urbanisation and people are becoming progressively disconnected from nature.

One of the favourite places I've cared for is Hattah-Kulkyne National Park in north-west Victoria, alongside the Murray River. In the midst of the millennium drought, environmental water deliveries were instrumental in sustaining priority drought refuges, including internationally protected wetlands. This initially involved temporary pumps to deliver water, with a permanent pump station later constructed, one of the largest in Australia.

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When the Hattah Lakes were topped up with environmental water it was wonderful to see the vitality of the place. The birds and frogs loudly proclaimed how thrilled they were with the outcome! However, some days I was the only person on site and I realised that unfortunately, few people would witness the outcomes that had been achieved.

Valuing ecosystem services

The Australian Conservation Foundation attempted to show people why they should care by developing a case study demonstrating the economic benefits of Hattah Lakes. In 2010 they concluded that the lakes provide an annual economic value of \$14.5 million dollars through tourism, water filtration, habitat, flood control and water storage. The tourism and recreation value (direct use) comes from an estimate of just 70,000 visitors per year. Not a large number - the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park in western Victoria easily has more than 10 times that - while visitors to Victoria's parks estate exceed 100 million per year.

I subsequently worked on a project for Parks Victoria which quantified the benefits that parks and their ecosystems provide using environmental accounting. Valuing Victoria's Parks (Parks Victoria, 2015) offers some impressive figures. For example, the provision of water filtration services from non-metropolitan parks (e.g. national parks) is valued at \$50 million per annum; the avoided cost through prevention of nitrogen in metropolitan waterways is \$33 million per annum; and retention of stormwater runoff from metropolitan parks avoids \$46 million in additional infrastructure.

At the time, the social and economic benefits resulting from maintaining or improving waterway ecosystems was also starting to receive greater attention. I was consequently commissioned by the Department of Environment, Land and Water and Planning (DELWP), in conjunction with the Victorian Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), to scope potential research into the key social benefits and consequent economic values of investing in Victorian waterways – our rivers, wetlands and estuaries.

Interviews I conducted showed that waterway managers were keenly aware their work has multiple benefits across the community, the bulk of which lives near rivers; they understood that healthy waterways underpin a healthy society and economy; and they knew that they needed to get better at defining these socio-economic benefits (Intrinsic Scope 2015). By documenting the potential benefits of waterway management we created more robust social and economic arguments for the Victorian Environmental Contributions business cases. That contributed to building investor confidence and \$222 million was subsequently allocated in the 2016 state budget to works targeting improved river health - the largest ever state government investment in waterway health.

Case studies

Over the years I have learnt that you shouldn't underestimate the power of a story. Business cases can be strengthened through robust and engaging case studies, turning anecdotes into compelling narratives. This is where people and partnerships really shine. They give a place heart, and to the public a story they can relate to is often more influential than the large economic figures that impress investors. For many, the big numbers are simply that, big numbers, and people don't trust they can be relied upon.

It is not enough to just tell people that natural resources matter, how much they are worth or the avoided cost of effective catchment management. We need to find messages that resonate with people. To do this well we need to avoid esoteric concepts or terms that can be misunderstood – as demonstrated by research commissioned by the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (ORIMA 2017). For example, rather than using the term environmental water, water for the environment was found to be more appropriate.

While awareness of the benefits of environmental water was generally low, the ORIMA research found the key motivators that enhanced support included community, commercial and recreational benefits (Loo *et al.* 2018). So we need to link to and highlight these values our community hold. Communicating the benefits of the work we do to local people and to the places they care about will achieve far more than talking only of

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the activities and projects we undertake in terms of statistics, numbers, biological or engineering terms. This is reinforced in the framing paper Australia contributed to the United Nation's High Level Panel on Water (Aither 2018):

It is imperative that environmental outcomes are tied back to people and to the wide range of benefits that are underpinned by system health. Communications should focus on celebrating successes and acknowledging achievements that reflect outcomes beyond the environmental and ecological. These achievements could be related to relationships and partnerships that have been formed, financial contributions, or the efforts of specific individuals.

Outcome reporting

The Victorian Government were justifiably keen to showcase return on investment and public backing for their \$222 million investment in waterway health committed in the 2016 state budget. The outputs were largely known (for example the area of revegetation and weed control or the number and type of visitor facilities installed), but the higher level outcomes weren't initially well understood or tracked. In conceptual models this included management outcomes such as increased amenity and accessibility which support a range of social values. Managers anticipated these outcomes but often didn't collect evidence showing progress towards them.

Consequently, attention was given to building the capacity of managers to better communicate the outcomes and benefits of water and catchment management. To improve benefit and outcome reporting I was engaged by DELWP to trial social and cultural indicators for long-term river restoration projects. Long-term river restoration efforts can take years, if not decades, to reach their restoration targets. Recovery can continue well after the bulk of the work has been delivered. Describing and communicating management progress and restoration expectations to both investors and the community over time is therefore critically important.

As an example, Mallee CMA are working with the local community to improve recreational outcomes for floodplain near the town of Merbein, just north of Mildura. This site provides an important connection between the town and the Murray River for locals, and it is hoped investment to improve the condition of the area will also improve liveability for nearby residents, increase the community's pride in the site, and draw in additional visitors – with visitor numbers reportedly exceeding those for Hattah-Kulkyne National Park (a more remote location).

Benchmark surveys showed that across the Merbein sites, satisfaction with the amenity and access for recreation was low, ranging from 32% to 54% for individual wetland and floodplain sites (Intrinsic Scope 2018). The CMA subsequently set targets and have forecast what they expect to see, the trajectory of recovery in social value, relative to the works planned. They can now track how satisfied users are with amenity and access to understand how the intervention influences these management outcomes. Over time this type of outcome reporting will also allow the influence of externalities to be better understood and improve scenario planning.

A cultural indicators trial was also undertaken. Following discussion with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations Board, Aboriginal Waterway Assessments (AWAs) were identified as an existing tool with the potential to help establish and track cultural indicators, with this approach able to generate scores as an index, thereby protecting Traditional Owner intellectual property rights. This work found that enabling Traditional Owners to generate measures for Aboriginal cultural values is anticipated to assist with identifying environmental (biophysical) outcomes which meet Traditional Owner aspirations for waterways. The process also can promote two-way learning with catchment managers plus generate complementary non-biophysical outcomes such as building greater capacity to monitor and manage waterway assets that support cultural practices, and reinvigorated traditional ecological knowledge (Intrinsic Scope 2019a; Intrinsic Scope 2020).

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The Victorian Government's public-sector reform agenda has now established an Outcomes Framework for all Government agencies, and this architecture focuses on providing evidence of what has been achieved for the community. Agencies are expected to use a strong outcomes-focused approach in their planning, delivery and monitoring. Outcomes are not individual activities or outputs. They measure success rather than delivery. There will be increasing focus on maximising shared benefits and so managers will need to get better at recognising and reporting these benefits.

Clarity and consistency in planning for, measuring and communicating the co-benefits of waterway management can help to ensure the social and cultural values of rivers, estuaries and wetlands aren't overlooked. It can also contribute to enhancing the associated health, community cohesion, liveability and economic outcomes (Intrinsic Scope 2019b). This is at a time when the public good and economic contribution of nature-based activity is being progressively recognised and prioritised.

Victoria is preparing for a warmer, drier future with less water available and more extreme events. In dry conditions and in drought, less water is available for all uses and recreational uses of our waterways can be limited. Yet it is at these times that the presence of water and recreational opportunities provide relief for people and can become even more important for communities (DELWP 2019).

Conclusions

Waterway management and environmental watering activities are undertaken principally to attain ecological outcomes. Consequently, these outcomes have received considerable attention while the associated social and cultural outcomes have not. This is rapidly changing however, with more broadly communicable approaches for reporting on co-benefits a long-term goal of many agencies. A range of studies now exist to demonstrate the multiple benefits and services provided by healthy waterways. In addition, environmental accounting is advancing, case studies are becoming more compelling (particularly where they support locally relevant and engaging story telling) and management outcomes that support social and cultural values have been successfully developed and trialled. As managers are asked to increasingly maximise the shared benefits of investing in waterways, our understanding of, and ability to effectively communicate these benefits will continue to progress.

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