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The relative importance of social, economic and political aspects of decision-making compared to the ecological aspects during environmental planning

Key words: planning considerations, social, economic, political

Abstract:

During the controversial rezoning in the Great Barrier Reef in the early 2000s (better known as the Representative Areas Program or RAP), biophysical and social sciences both provided a fundamental underpinning during the planning process. However, whilst the best available ecological knowledge was applied and provided a key determining factor for the outcome, unquestionably the final plan was heavily influenced by various social, economic, managerial and political considerations.

This presentation will examine the relative roles of these key drivers, comparing their relative roles in achieving the effective environmental outcome. It will highlight the importance of not only recognising the critical role of these non-ecological drivers (and their relative importance compared to the ecological aspects), but also highlight the importance of appropriate timing for such inputs for effective environmental planning.

Effective leadership also occurred at a number of levels; however, without this leadership, it is likely the RAP would not have been such a success. In assessing the relative roles of leadership, science and politics, this presentation will discuss key lessons including:

- The differing perspectives of scientists compared to managers and to politicians
- The success of RAP was the result of the combined efforts of a range of people who were capably 'steered' by a very effective leadership team (the team was led by the Chair of the agency and primarily comprised agency officers – however, non-public servants also played a role)
- The role of bi-partisan political endorsement ... and factors that contributed to that.
- Problems in utilising non-ecological aspects in analytical decision-support tools
- Some common misunderstandings such as the belief that total consensus or 'win-wins' by all stakeholders are achievable when dealing with environmental planning processes that are large and complex.
- The degree to which some key players changed their minds during the course of RAP... and why.