

SECTION 6: Community Involvement and Education

KEY
PRIORITY

To raise the environmental understanding of our community and encourage informed debate and wider involvement in ecologically sustainable activities in Townsville-Thuringowa



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Governments realise that managing natural resources through regulation and enforcement are ineffective without understanding, support and participation from the community's resource users and managers. Commonwealth and State governments fund a range of programs for community-based initiatives to promote and implement sustainable use of natural resources.

In Townsville-Thuringowa, environment and nature-based community groups vary widely in their focus and activities. Limited opportunities exist for these groups to communicate and collaborate with each other and with government agencies, which leads to inefficient use of sparse community resources, reduced participation in decision-making and policy, and ultimately a fragmented approach to natural resource management. This is detrimental to the common goals of sustainability and environmental conservation.

The formation and endorsement of a Natural Resources and Environment Forum (NaREF) is the first priority of this Section. The NaREF would provide opportunities for representatives of community organisations, government agencies, business and private citizens to meet, debate to resolve issues, and collaborate to further the sustainable use and management of natural resources in Townsville-Thuringowa.

FROM AWARENESS TO UNDERSTANDING

Biological diversity benefits humans in many ways. Protection of biodiversity is necessary for long-term coexistence with our natural environment. This can only occur when communities and governments take care of local biological resources.

The negative environmental consequences of many actions in the community are not always obvious. Often, the “cause-and-effect” relationship between actions and impacts are not clear. It is not easy to explain the hidden consequences of actions in a way that is meaningful to local communities. It is particularly difficult when the impacts are on a large-scale, have long-term effects, or appear after some delay. This makes it quite difficult for users and managers of natural resources to fully appreciate why we need to change some of the currently accepted practices known to be damaging the environment. Therefore, improving awareness and understanding of the environmental effects of our actions is a priority.

Sometimes, negative perceptions of wetlands lead to harmful activities at sensitive sites. Because wetlands and riparian areas are widely used for recreation on public and private property, increasing the understanding of all residents about wetland and riparian values will help ensure that these resources are protected and used wisely.

This Section is about biodiversity and local native species, wetlands and waterways and threats to our natural resources and environment. It promotes programs to improve awareness, and to move towards a greater understanding of the ecological processes occurring all around us. A vision is set for translating this understanding into actions that will benefit natural resource management and conservation for the whole community. The emphases are on involving all relevant sections of the community, supplying both broad and locally specific knowledge where needed, and promoting local action to solve both local and global problems.

INVOLVING CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS

We need to ensure that children grow up with a feeling of stewardship towards nature and a sound understanding of environmental problems and potential solutions. Providing children with environmental information may spark a future willingness to use natural resources sustainably but may not enable them to do so. We need to equip them with problem solving and conflict resolution skills to address multidimensional and complex environmental issues. A priority of this Section is to promote and support local school programs and other initiatives that encourage children in hands-on projects which address local environmental issues.

INVOLVING BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

Business and industry are fundamental to the local economy and provide major employment opportunities. However, industrial and residential developments can be major threats to environmental quality and sustainability of resources. Many industries have addressed this problem by modifying their practices to minimise impacts on natural resources.

A major priority in this Section is to establish the Natural Resource and Environment Forum (NaREF) to improve communication and understanding between the community and business sectors so that all developments are undertaken with respect for environmental values and the concerns of the community. The NaREF will also assist the community to join in projects with local business and industry groups to restore degraded environments, safeguard conservation values, and achieve sustainable management of our resources.

STRATEGY 6.1 CONSOLIDATING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Over the last two decades, the Australian community has become progressively more involved in the management of natural resources. Governments have come to realise that regulation and enforcement in managing human uses of natural resources are not effective without the understanding, support and participation of the resource users and managers in the community.

A range of Commonwealth and State government programs provides funding to community-based initiatives for promoting and implementing the sustainable use of natural resources.

Recent policy discussion papers highlight the important roles that regional communities will play in the future management of natural resources. Regional communities will be expected to manage funding for implementing strategic projects, and play key roles in developing policies for allocation and management of natural resources. These increased responsibilities will be rewarded with a more active and stronger role in the decision-making process, which should result in more equitable and sustainable management of our natural assets. Our community needs to get ready for this role by building on existing community enthusiasm, resources and expertise.

In Townsville-Thuringowa, nature-based community groups vary widely in the focus they have and the types of activities they undertake. Communication and collaboration among these groups could be improved to help achieve the overall common goals of sustainability and environmental conservation. There is a need to consolidate the structure of community involvement to improve the efficiency of limited community resources, increase community influence in policy-making, and achieve more holistic management of natural resources.

❖ WHY CONSOLIDATE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION?

Effective communication and collaboration between groups, individuals and agencies concerned with the use and management of natural resources will:

- ensure coordination among management initiatives, thus making efficient use of available resources;
- allow for a wider range of values and interests to be considered and debated, and facilitate resolution of conflicts when these arise; and
- provide a more effective mechanism for the community to contribute to local decision and policy making at all levels of government and the commercial sector.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can increase the willingness and ability of Townsville-Thuringowa residents to share responsibilities and decisions for natural resource management and biodiversity conservation.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★★ The formation and endorsement of a Natural Resources and Environment Forum for Townsville-Thuringowa, where representatives of community organisations, government agencies and the commercial sector can meet, debate and resolve differences for the sustainable use and development of our natural resources.
- ★★★ Pro-active implementation and coordination of the action plans recommended by this and other regional Strategies and integration of these with government and industry projects.
- ★★★ Improved communication between the community and decision-makers on matters concerning natural resource management and environmental conservation.
- ★★★ Improved coordination and support of community initiatives and groups working on the ground.

STRATEGY 6.2 INVOLVING BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Business and industry are fundamental to the local economy and provide vital employment opportunities in Townsville-Thuringowa. However, industrial and residential developments can represent some of the biggest threats to the environmental sustainability of land and water resources. Over the last decade, many industries have done a lot to regulate their environmental practices and minimise their impacts on natural resources. Governments are also contributing to this trend through the introduction of incentives for cleaner production systems and the adoption of best-practice policies. However, there is still room to improve communication between local communities and the commercial sector, to ensure that future developments are undertaken with the support of residents and with respect for the health and quality of the environment. Many opportunities exist for the community to join in projects with business and industry groups to restore local environments and safeguard natural resources. The commercial sector presents many opportunities to find further support for a growing number of local projects. Such collaborations should build on a recognition of the social, economic and environmental benefits that would flow from the sustainable use of all local resources.

❖ WHY INVOLVE BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY?

Communication and collaboration between community groups concerned with natural resources and the commercial sector will:

- decrease the likelihood of open conflicts in cases of controversial development proposals;
- provide opportunities of support for local community-based projects for the environment; and
- be essential for balanced and sustainable use and development of local natural resources.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can improve communication between local communities and the commercial sector to ensure mutual understanding and collaboration in achieving the long-term sustainable use of our natural resources.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★★ An open forum for communication between community, industry groups and governments on issues of local relevance for the sustainable development of Townsville-Thuringowa.
- ★★ Joint projects supported by the commercial sector and implemented by the community for the protection of local biodiversity and environmental quality.
- ★★ Improved consultation protocols by industry in all stages of proposed projects, including impact assessment and monitoring.
- ★★ Improved accessibility for the public to information on environmental aspects of industrial activities.
- ★★★ Recognition of positive environmental processes through industry awards.

STRATEGY 6.3 INVOLVING CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The concept of ecologically sustainable development has emerged as a global imperative. It appears that future generations will inherit the challenge of redefining human interactions with nature.

We need to ensure that all children grow up with a feeling of stewardship towards nature and a sound understanding of current environmental problems and potential solutions. Giving children information on the environment may contribute to their future willingness to use natural resources in a sustainable way, but it may not be enough to help them take actions. We need to equip them with the problem solving and conflict resolution skills required to address the complexity of environmental issues.

Parents need to engender in children a responsible attitude toward the use of natural resources and the conservation of biological diversity. Members of our community must promote and support local school programs that encourage children in hands-on projects which address local environmental issues.

❖ WHY INVOLVE CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS?

Children who understand the values of our natural resources and the implications of unsustainable use are more likely to:

- embrace responsible attitudes towards the use and management of natural resources;
- take the message home; and
- enjoy healthy environments and a good quality of life in adulthood.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can foster our children's respect for nature and prepare them for the challenge of finding a sustainable coexistence with the natural environment over the long-term.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★★ Increased involvement of local schools in caring for the environment, through incorporation of local issues and initiatives in curricula.
- ★★★ Greater emphasis placed on the potential of existing community-based projects as learning activities for children.
- ★★ Involvement of target groups (parents associations, sporting groups and playgroups) in hands-on environmental projects.
- ★★★ Increased recognition of the contribution that children make to conservation activities.

STRATEGY 6.4 PROMOTING LOCAL BIODIVERSITY

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Although most people have encountered the term “biodiversity” (short for biological diversity), not everyone understands what it means and why it is relevant to us.

Biological diversity refers to the variety of life forms that have evolved on the planet over hundreds of millions of years. This includes all the animal and plant species and micro-organisms that live on our planet, and all the genetic materials that allow them to survive. Biodiversity also comprises the diversity of habitats and communities of plants and animals that influence the continuing evolution of genes and species on Earth.

This diversity underpins the productivity of natural and agricultural systems (supplying food, timber, wildlife); maintains the quality of water; renews the air we breathe; stabilises our climate; provides us with cures for a range of diseases; and improves the quality and enjoyment of our lives in numerous ways.

Australia is one of the twelve most diverse countries in the world, mainly because of the richness of species unique to the continent. However, Australia has experienced very high rates of extinction over the last two hundred years, due to the activities of humans. Worse still, the rates of decline in biological diversity appear to have accelerated over the last 50 years, driven mainly by the destruction of habitats and the introduction of exotic species.

Protection of biodiversity must form the basis of any attempt to coexist in the long-term with our planet’s natural environment. This cannot occur without local communities and governments taking care of local environments. We need to improve our understanding and respect of how biodiversity benefits us, through communication in locally relevant contexts.

❖ WHY PROMOTE LOCAL BIODIVERSITY?

When people fully appreciate what it will mean to them if biodiversity is lost and landscapes are degraded, they will be more likely to care for their local environment and protect local native flora and fauna.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can spark wider appreciation of our local native flora, fauna and ecosystems, and encourage the sustainable use of our land, water and biological resources.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★★ Clear and accessible information on local biological diversity.
- ★★★ Development of locally relevant “action guides” and programs tailored to suit groups active in Townsville-Thuringowa.
- ★★ Increased appreciation and acceptance of the abundance and diversity of our fauna and flora, and greater willingness to coexist with our natural environment, rather than modify it.
- ★★★ Support for education programs developed and delivered by community groups.
- ★★ Adoption by local communities and governments of a “local provenance species” policy for public landscaping and rehabilitation projects.
- ★★★ Improved promotion by the local media of the need for protecting our local biological resources

STRATEGY 6.5 BUILDING STEWARDSHIP FOR WETLANDS AND WATERWAYS

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The community is starting to recognise the ecological significance and environmental values of wetlands and waterways. However, negative perceptions of wetlands and drainage areas still persist, including the views that they are convenient dumping grounds for rubbish and watering points for stock. These attitudes often result in detrimental activities being undertaken at sensitive sites. Wetlands and riparian areas are widely used for recreational purposes, but unregulated access often results in environmental damage.

Increasing the understanding of residents in Townsville-Thuringowa about wetland and riparian values will help to ensure the protection and wise use of these resources. Community education programs should target recreational users of wetlands and waterways. Many wetlands and riparian areas are on private property, so programs are needed that encourage and effectively assist all landholders in the adoption of appropriate land management practices to minimise impacts on wetlands and riverine ecosystems.

We should also build community education programs around the local wetlands that are accessible to the general public. Examples of sites potentially suited to general awareness programs include Ross River, Townsville Town Common and the freshwater swamp at Blakey's Crossing.

❖ WHY BUILD STEWARDSHIP FOR WETLANDS?

A community that appreciates the conservation significance of wetlands and watercourses and understands the benefits of wise use and management of these natural resources will enjoy healthy environments with better quality water and more visually pleasant landscapes.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility in the community towards the wetlands and waterways of Townsville-Thuringowa, which will result in the protection of habitat values and wise, sustainable use of natural resources values.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★★ Increased community understanding of the values of inland, coastal and marine wetlands and riverine systems and the benefits of protecting and managing them.
- ★★ Active involvement of the community, via individual and group actions, in the protection and wise use of wetlands and riparian ecosystems and resources.
- ★★★ Support for education programs developed and delivered by community groups.
- ★★★ Involvement of private landholders in management of wetlands and riparian zones, according to priorities in Strategies 3.1 and 3.2.

STRATEGY 6.6 COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY

❖ WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The environmental consequences of our actions are not always obvious. Many of the activities we undertake, as part of our work, gardening, house maintenance or recreation may have detrimental effects on the natural environment.

This Strategy has identified several processes that pose serious threats to the sustainability of our natural resources. The “cause and effect” relationship between our actions and their impacts on natural resources is not always clearly identifiable, even by the best scientific research. This makes it difficult to discuss the issues in terms that are meaningful to local communities. It is particularly difficult when the effects occur on a large scale, over a long-term, or after some delay in time, such as the cases of accelerated global warming and increased salinity in the soil. It can therefore be difficult for resource users to fully appreciate the consequences of currently accepted practices that are known or believed to be detrimental and unsustainable.

It is a priority to improve the awareness and understanding among resource users and managers of the known consequences of current practices. Communication of issues and impacts through the local media could be improved. Development of more education programs targeted at relevant sections of the community, industry and government agencies should be encouraged and promoted. But unfortunately, it is not certain that information alone will result in the adoption of more sustainable practices by the community. However, there is evidence that active involvement of the community in rehabilitation and environmental research promotes more responsible actions. We should value local community-based projects for rehabilitation and research (eg. the RIVER Group) as valuable educational opportunities for fostering sustainable actions. It will take time to challenge established ways and change how we use and manage resources. While it is essential to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of education programs for sustainability, we must recognise that long-term commitments to support these programs are needed by the community, government and industry.

❖ WHY IS COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY IMPORTANT?

A better understanding of our impacts on the environment may reduce detrimental activities and increase practices that are more sustainable for the use and management of natural resources.

❖ WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We can understand what activities are detrimental to the health and functioning of our ecosystems and learn how to modify our practices to be more sustainable.

❖ WHAT CAN THIS STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

- ★★ Better understanding of the broad concept of ecologically sustainable development.
- ★★★ Easy access to information on specific practices and their effects on the local environment.
- ★★ Long-term education and communication programs targeted at relevant sections of the community, industry and government, aimed at promoting sustainable practices.