

A community guide to monitoring and evaluating natural resource management projects

Keeping track of your achievements



Preserving the health of our environment and improving the sustainability of agriculture requires a significant investment of time, money and effort by governments, industry, landholders and community groups.

The Australian Government is taking the lead through its \$3 billion Natural Heritage Trust (Trust) and the \$1.4 billion National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP). Combined, these programs represent the largest commitment in Australia's history to protecting and sustaining the environment.

Given such a substantial financial commitment, the Australian and State/Territory governments have developed a comprehensive framework to evaluate the performance of natural resource management programs. It takes a long-term approach, and is based on the knowledge that attaining sustainability won't happen overnight; it will take decades.

The framework also recognises that natural resource management is not about the one big thing we do – it's ensuring that the thousands of little things on the ground contribute to progress towards national long-term outcomes.

It's important then, that all projects are supported by a useful, practical and cost-effective monitoring and evaluation process. This will help groups gather information about their project and its impact, and show their local community and funding agencies how their project has contributed to improving the overall condition of our nation's natural resources.

Monitoring and evaluation does not need to be a complicated or expensive process. It just needs to provide you with enough information to make decisions about how your work is going, and to make any necessary adjustments to your methods or approach. So even a simple monitoring and evaluation process should improve your project's impact, and provide you with some evidence that your work is having its desired effect.



Measuring success

A quick guide to monitoring and evaluation

So what exactly is monitoring and evaluation? In simple terms, monitoring is about observing what is going on, and evaluation involves reflecting on your observations and responding to opportunities and challenges. Appropriate monitoring provides critical information that can help you make better decisions about how to run your project.

There are many resources available to help you develop a monitoring and evaluation process that suits your group and your project (references can be found on the back of this brochure). To get you started, here's a simple four-step guide.

1. Set your objectives

It is important to work out exactly what your project is trying to achieve. People will have different opinions on what the problem is, the best way to tackle it, and who should be involved. An open discussion when you are developing the project plan will allow all project group members to share their thoughts. As a group, you can then develop a project plan that everyone agrees to.

At this early stage it's also critical that you consult your regional body to ensure your project complements the priorities for your area. Your regional body can be a very useful resource, so establish dialogue early in the process (visit www.nrm.gov.au/about-regions for your nearest contact).

Answering the following questions will help you set your objectives and create your vision.

- ▶ What have you identified as the issue or problem?
- ▶ What are you trying to achieve in this project?
- ▶ What do you want to change?
- ▶ Who needs to be involved?
- ▶ Who do you need to communicate with?
- ▶ How will you know if you have succeeded?



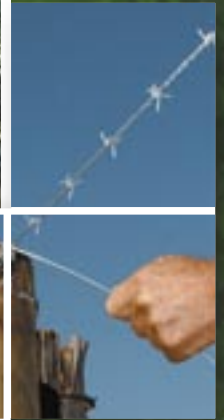
2. Prepare your plan

Once you have agreement on what you are trying to achieve, you can begin planning what needs to be done. Remember to build in monitoring at this early stage. This will provide crucial information that will tell you if your approach needs changing, or if your project has had the desired impact.

Answering the following questions will help you determine your priorities and develop a plan for success.

- ▶ What are you going to do and when and where are you going to do it?
- ▶ What resources do you need? What resources do you have within the group? What resources will you need to find elsewhere?
- ▶ What initial information do you need to gather?
- ▶ Will your timing be affected by seasons or drought?
- ▶ How will you know if the project is on track?
- ▶ Who will collect data about your project, and how will they store it? How will you ensure your data is accessible for use in the future?
- ▶ How will you analyse your data? How will you interpret it?
- ▶ Are you being realistic?

Measuring the success of your project



3. Monitor your progress

Ongoing monitoring will help ensure your project produces the desired changes. It involves keeping records of activities (the outputs), and measuring the results of those activities (the outcomes). At the end of your project, it will help you to evaluate the success of the project and learn from your experiences. And importantly, you'll have useful information that you can share with others.

To set up a monitoring process, you should consider the following questions.

- ▶ What is the best thing to monitor, in order to see if your project is working?
- ▶ How often should you monitor it to find out if you are on track?
- ▶ Does the information you are collecting answer your questions?
- ▶ Is your monitoring providing information that may be useful to other groups?
- ▶ Do you need to present preliminary results to ensure continued funding?

4. Evaluate how you are going, and how you went

Every project is a learning experience – for the individuals participating in the project, for the group as a whole, for your funding source(s) or sponsors, and for others who may be looking to implement a similar approach.

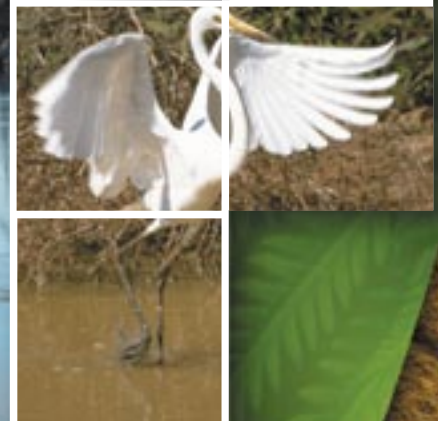
Reviewing the results of your monitoring throughout the project will help you to continually evaluate your progress. At the end of the project you should also do a full evaluation so that you can incorporate the lessons into your next project. Answering the following questions throughout the project will help you assess the true impact of your work.

- ▶ What does the analysis of your monitoring tell you? What does it mean?
- ▶ Should you be adjusting what you're doing or how you're doing it?
- ▶ How will you maintain the outcomes of your project to make sure it doesn't go backwards?
- ▶ Are resources being used in the best possible way?
- ▶ Are you communicating your progress to the right people?

At the conclusion of the project, once you have put away the tools and washed your hands, you will need to think about:

- ▶ How did you go? Did you make a difference?
- ▶ Will there be continued positive impacts after the project has finished?
- ▶ When is the appropriate time to stop monitoring?
- ▶ How can you share what you've done with other groups?
- ▶ Are stakeholders (eg funding bodies) aware of your achievements?
- ▶ Where do you go from here?

Measuring success



Monitoring and Evaluation Tips

- Keep it simple – think about what you need to monitor to show that your project is working. Focus on a few key aspects so you can get results without it becoming complex and demanding.
- Ensure it's relevant – think carefully about whether those aspects you have chosen to monitor are going to provide you with the information you will need to make decisions and adjust the way you are doing your work.
- Make the most of your resources – remember to design monitoring into your project from the start. Are there people you can ask to take on this role as part of their contribution to your project?
- Review similar projects – are there successes and mistakes you can learn from? Contact your NRM facilitator for information about other projects in your area.
- Promote the results – everyone likes a good news story. Local media are often interested in projects, especially those that involve the community. Bulletin boards and newsletters are also good ways of promoting your project to others who may be interested.
- Ensure sustainability – remember to plan for the long term. Who will maintain the project's outcomes after the funding runs out?

Like to know more?

For further information:

- The Australian Government Envirofund Monitoring and Evaluation Package is a step-by-step guide to designing, managing and evaluating projects:
www.nht.gov.au/envirofund
- The Department of the Environment and Heritage website has an extensive list of references compiled to assist community groups find information on natural resource management monitoring techniques: www.deh.gov.au/land/publications/resources.html
- For responses to specific questions email m&e@deh.gov.au
- Freecall 1800 552 008 for further general information, or to speak to the Monitoring and Evaluation Section within the Australian Government's NRM Team.

Contact Details:

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