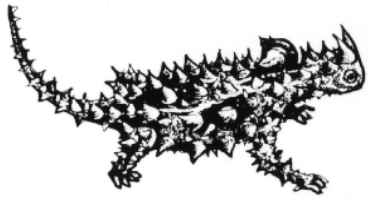


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Submission on the Draft Lake Eyre Basin State of the Basin Condition Assessment 2016

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) welcomes the release of the Draft Lake Eyre Basin State of the Basin Condition Assessment report. This basin is integral to the health and ecological functioning of Arid Central Australia. ALEC is committed to working with Government to facilitate best practice land management and communicate the environmental health of the arid lands to the people of central Australia. ALEC has been engaged with the Lake Eyre Basin working group since the initial agreement and is committed to working with the Government to maintain and improve the health of the system.

Environmental indicators

While it is heartening to see that the assessment report concludes that the basin is generally in a good condition, there are certain key reservations about the validity of this conclusion. As only four indicators (fish, water quality, hydrology and water birds) have been chosen to be monitored, there is a concern that the report may not accurately capture the condition of the entire system, but rather describe the condition of the rivers.

Acknowledging that there are resource and scale restraints in assessing the health of such a large system, the exclusion of ground water relationships and riparian condition is critical. The riparian zones of many of the rivers are known to be heavily infested with invasive weed populations, especially Athel Pine in the upper reaches of the Finke. It is fundamental that riparian condition and invasive weed populations are researched in greater detail to provide a more holistic assessment. ALEC would like to see more indicators included in the next assessment report. We would also like to see more frequent reporting, with the next report available in five years. The indicators that need to be included are: riparian vegetation, groundwater connectivity, land use assessments and catchment geomorphology. It is also important that cultural factors and traditional ecological knowledge is incorporated into the next assessment.

The Lake Eyre Basin is an incredibly dynamic and variable system that has long term cycles that are far greater than the length of this agreement so it is fundamental that more indicators are included in the next assessment report.

There is a concern that the conclusion of this report will legitimise or allow for the continued expansion of industries or practices that would otherwise be seen as a serious risk to the Basin. The “generally good” condition may be justification for certain industries to operate unchecked. There needs to be an assessment of the carrying capacity of the Basin to make sure that new industries do not increase stress on the region. It may also undermine the impetus for restoration and enhancement, which are fundamental to best practice environmental management. If the

condition is good what is the need to do anything but maintain the status quo? This is problematic considering some regions require rehabilitation.

Stressors and responses

The report has comprehensively identified a range of stressors and related responses across the basin. In the document, it was not clear why the section risks and pressures came after the assessment of the condition. A better approach would be to identify risks and pressures which would then inform strategy to develop monitoring and management objectives. This is further complicated by the fact that there were no clear outcomes or guidelines to develop management strategies of these stressors. We would like to more attention on this in future reports.

While climate change is listed as a significant stressor on the basin, there is little detail about the ways in which this would impact condition. There is a significant lack of information available to inform any climate change projections, but this should not preclude an attempt to devise management strategies or policies for cross border collaboration on climate adaptation and resilience building. Climate change adaptation and resilience require a more proactive response than simply maintaining health. There needs to be greater collaboration with the Department of Environment and scientific organisations to improve the level of data regarding the impact of climate change in arid Australia. The next report should aspire to provide more detail on the climate change projections of the region and how this will impact the environmental health of the basin and catchments, not just hydrology, water quality, fish and water birds.

Application of the report

It is not entirely clear what the objective of the report is going forward. It would be valuable for the community and land managers if the intended operation and use of the report was clarified. As stated, one of the main aims of the report is to describe the status of the Basin but to what end is such a description useful? Who is the intended audience of such a condition assessment? If they are local land managers this report may be of limited use. ALEC recommends a more concerted effort to improve cross departmental collaboration and research into the stressors and potential management actions. The report is a valuable opportunity to provide critical oversight and guidance to natural resource managers across the Basin.

It is also worth mentioning the issue of scale. Considering the large scale of the basin it is difficult to see how the observations could inform local management practices. Regional conditions do not necessarily translate to local conditions. There needs to be more clarification on how the observations and conclusions can be used by pastoralists, environmental organisations and communities to maintain and improve the condition of the sub-catchments.

Conclusion

All attempts should be made to make the report and its findings accessible to a wide range of stakeholders in the community. The technical reports that provide the foundation of the findings should be made publicly available and the entire report should be available as one document. The Lake Eyre basin is one of Australia's greatest natural assets so it is fundamental that its condition does not deteriorate. It needs to remain largely untouched by the processes that have degraded other Australian Basins. The plan should incorporate more environmental indicators and develop a more targeted and strategic approach to managing stresses on the system. ALEC appreciates the

opportunity to contribute and looks forward to working with the Government and the community as the agreement progresses.

Recommendations

- That the next assessment report includes more indicators including; riparian condition, catchment geomorphology, groundwater connectivity, amphibians and cultural sites and connection.
- That there is greater collaboration and effort to develop more reliable climate change projects.
- That subsequent reports outlined management and monitoring strategies that are connected to the stressors and responses.
- That the technical reports are made publicly available.
- That assessment of condition includes an evaluation in trends regarding risks and pressures.