

A Participative Approach to Sustainability in Action: Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation

Abstract: UNESCO added the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve to its global network of Biosphere reserves in November 2002. The working group that prepared the nomination included representatives of State and local government and community groups as well as interested individuals. Preparing the nomination was an exercise in co-operation and shared respect for values in the context of an extensive and highly diverse geographic area.

In December 2003 a Foundation was established under the Corporations Act 2001 to deliver the Biosphere reserve programs envisaged in the nomination. The inaugural meeting adopted a Charter and (with reservations) a Constitution. At the heart of the concerns was the issue of whether the Foundation would be predominantly driven by its membership, relative to the degree of influence or direction from the State government and local government partners' representatives on the Board.

The Foundation is now moving into its operational phase, focusing on development of sustainability programs directed at issues relevant in the Biosphere reserve. It has a large human population living in suburbs, towns, villages and farmland, challenges in terms of transport logistics, a major port in a sensitive environmental setting, important intensive horticultural industries and high profile tourism foci. With diverse views about sustainability and priorities among the membership and participating organisations, well-chosen engagement methods will be critical to leading and sharing a long-term sustainable vision for the Biosphere reserve.

Introduction

What is a Biosphere reserve?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) launched its *Man and the Biosphere Programme* in 1970¹. The programme provides for the designation of large geographic areas as Biosphere reserves, subject to specified criteria. Essentially, Biosphere reserves include areas that support high biodiversity values, and provide opportunities for scientific monitoring and research. Biosphere reserves include core areas, where biodiversity conservation is the priority; buffer areas to insulate the core values from disturbance and transition areas where sustainable economic development is provided for.

Over time, the concept of Biosphere reserves has evolved, especially in the light of the Seville Conference in 1995 which led to the adoption of the Seville Strategy. The Strategy reinforces the importance and value of the Biosphere reserve concept, and in particular highlights the importance of using Biosphere reserves “to explore and demonstrate approaches to sustainable development at the regional scale. For this, more attention should be given to the transition area” (Seville Strategy, p. 4)².

As at 26 April 2007, the global network of Biosphere reserves comprises 507 sites in 102 countries¹.

Other Biosphere reserves in Australia

Mornington Peninsula and Western Port is one of thirteen Australian Biosphere reserves, but was the first new Australian Biosphere reserve added to the global network in over twenty years. Eleven Australian Biosphere reserves were designated between 1977 and 1981, mostly relatively remote sites largely or entirely comprising dedicated conservation reserves.

In the early 1990s a proposal arose to establish an expanded Biosphere reserve comprising a number of properties adjacent to Danggali Conservation Park, a large reserve in south-eastern South Australia on the New South Wales border, north of the Murray River, which had been designated as a Biosphere reserve in 1977. The extended Biosphere reserve was designated in 1995 and renamed Bookmark Biosphere Reserve; it has since been renamed Riverland Biosphere Reserve³.

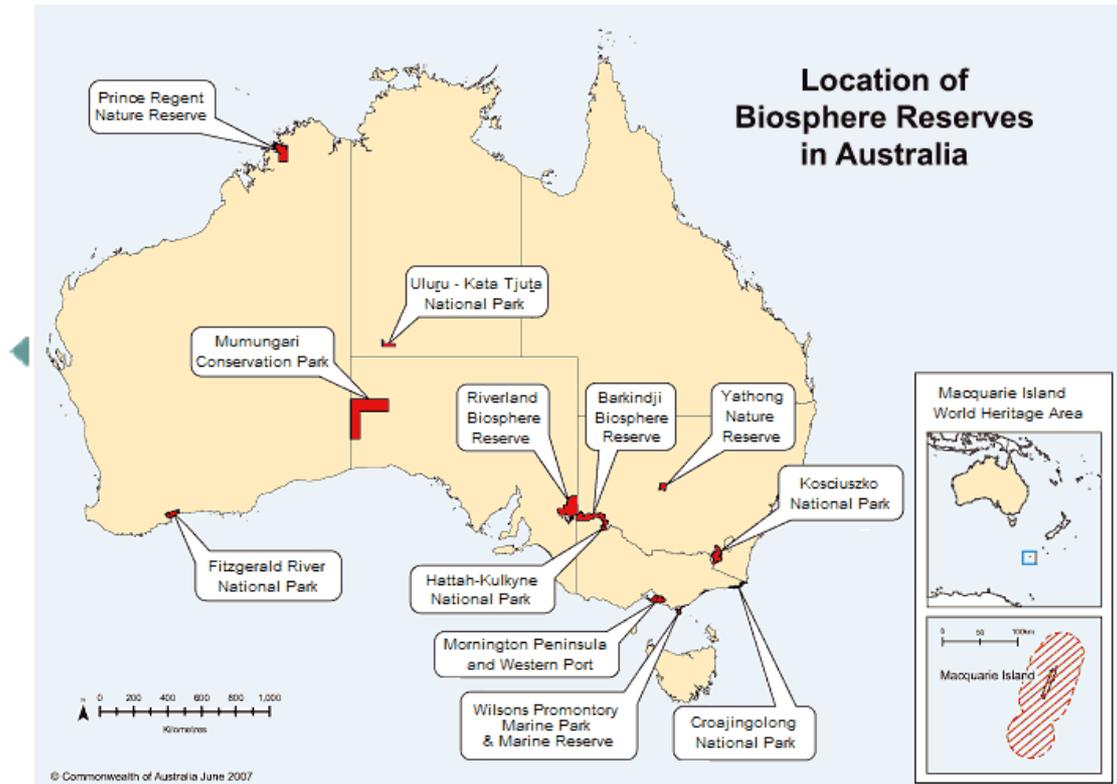


Figure 1: Locations of Australian Biosphere reserves (except Macquarie Island, located approximately 1800 km south-east of Tasmania) (from www.environment.gov.au)

The designation of the extended Bookmark Biosphere Reserve was significant because, in contrast with other Australian Biosphere reserves, it included extensive tracts of privately owned land, much of which was used for primary purposes other than conservation. Bookmark provided an important model when the proposal for a Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere reserve arose, as the only working example of a “post Seville” Biosphere reserve in Australia. Important aspects of Bookmark included its support by relevant local government authorities, the role of the Commonwealth as a land manager and the Biosphere reserve’s demonstrated success in attracting volunteer efforts and substantial funding from philanthropic and other non-government sources.

The nomination phase

The notion of a Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere reserve first appeared in print in the French Island National Park Management Plan⁴. The Plan describes the Biosphere reserve concept in terms of the Seville Strategy and notes its potential benefits for the National Park’s conservation objectives and for the achievement of broader environmental objectives in the Western Port area. Around the same time, the Mount Eliza Association for Environmental Care (MEAFEC) began to raise community interest in the prospect of

developing a formal nomination for a Biosphere reserve. However, there was always going to be a challenge in translating conceptual interest into the practical task of preparing a quality nomination.

In 2000 an informal working group was established under the chairmanship of Mornington Peninsula Shire Council (MPSC) Director of Sustainable Development Ian Morris. The working group included representation from RMIT University, Parks Victoria, Phillip Island Nature Park, MEAFEC and a number of other community representatives. While the working group operated somewhat loosely, it was strong enough to give the proposed nomination a credible prospect of success.

The working group recognised that the task of preparing a robust nomination would require substantial resources, because of the depth of information that would have to be collected and collated, and because of the importance of ensuring that all information was accurate and responded appropriately under the many headings specified in the nomination form. The Commonwealth Government's Local Government Incentive Programme grant program was identified, and technical advice was sought from the Victorian Department of Infrastructure (DOI) South East Metropolitan regional office, because the State Government's Office of Local Government was at that time located within DOI. DOI also had a strong relationship with the Council because of DOI's role in administering the land use planning system, for which general operational responsibility under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* lay with local government.

Although the funding application was ultimately unsuccessful, the process led to DOI regional office representation on the working group. At the time DOI regional offices had some discretionary budget for local initiatives, and the South East Metropolitan regional office was able to provide important financial support. Those funds, complementing cash and in kind contributions from other parties represented on the working group, enabled the employment of a project officer to co-ordinate the preparation of the nomination. Mornington Peninsula Shire Council employed the project officer and provided office space and ancillary support services. All parties represented on the working group contributed information towards the nomination, and RMIT University provided spatial information services so that geographic data could be presented in map form.

French Island National Park and Mornington Peninsula National Park, public reserves already dedicated to biodiversity conservation, were readily identified as comprising the "core" zone, and other small conservation reserves plus the waters of Western Port (already designated as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention) comprised the "buffer" zone. The remaining public and (predominantly) freehold areas were to be designated as the "transition" or "co-operative" area, where the Biosphere priority would be sustainable economic development.



Figure 2: Nominated Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve

The proposed Biosphere reserve’s geographic extent and large human population created challenges in terms of stakeholder engagement. Five local government authorities (including Mornington Peninsula Shire) are partly or entirely contained within the area; French Island, although it has a small permanent population, is not incorporated into any local government area. How could effective engagement be undertaken, and shown to have been undertaken, with the large and diverse population of such an extensive and relatively densely populated area? And how could ongoing engagement be enabled?

The appointment of a Project Officer helped in providing a focus for organising consultation with potentially interested or important stakeholders. Presentations were arranged with the Boards of bodies such as the Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Management Authority, the Phillip Island Nature Park, Landcare groups, businesses and business peak groups and Council staff. A brochure⁵ was produced and widely distributed to explain the concept of a Biosphere reserve, and in particular to clarify that the word “reserve” in the Biosphere context does not imply a new degree of statutory control or limitation over land use or land management. Members of the working group and other advocates of the Biosphere reserve contributed time to the process of informing the broader community.

Community representatives on the working group were concerned that the nomination should reflect the level of community commitment to sustainability. In that regard it was seen as important that there should be provision for ongoing community participation in the management of the Biosphere reserve once it was designated. However, the geography of the proposed Biosphere reserve constrained easy communication between individuals or groups. The shape and size of Western Port, along with the lack of road connections between the mainland, French Island and the western end of Phillip Island, meant that the driving time from one extremity of the Biosphere reserve to the other could be in excess of two hours. Therefore, the notion of engagement at more local levels within the Biosphere reserve gradually emerged.

As the nomination began to take shape, consultation was initiated with the State government, whose endorsement was needed for the nomination. Because the other three Victorian

Biosphere reserves were just National Parks (Croajingalong in East Gippsland, Wilsons Promontory in South Gippsland and Hattah-Kulkyne in the Mallee), their Biosphere reserve status had presented no particular challenges over the twenty-plus years since their designation. However, the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port proposal was essentially different, with its inclusion of extensive areas of private land and a large permanent population (along with a substantial additional seasonal population). Importantly, the proposed Biosphere reserve also included several significant industrial businesses as well as a commercial port. It was critical that the State government be assured that designation of a Biosphere reserve would not place undue constraints on the viability of major industries and facilities.

Over the early part of 2002, when the nomination had been largely completed, endorsement for the nomination was formally sought and given by all five affected local government authorities. In the meantime, the State government was aware that other Biosphere reserve nominations might follow, that Biosphere reserve nominations might be at least partly motivated by environmental activists' desire to place a barrier in the way of contentious development proposals and that the three existing Victorian Biosphere reserves did not provide useful precedents for consideration of post-Seville nominations. It therefore decided to formulate a policy on Biosphere reserves⁶. While the development of a policy could provide an objective framework for decision-making, however, the additional time it required, coinciding as it did with a State Ministerial reshuffle, threatened to delay endorsement of the nomination until after the annual deadline for submission of Biosphere reserve nominations to the International Co-ordinating Committee. In the event, a one month extension of time granted by the ICC allowed the nomination⁷ to receive endorsement and be hurried to Paris for consideration.

The waiting phase

Following submission of the nomination, engagement activities continued. In particular, a seminar entitled "Biospheres: Creating Sustainable Regional Communities" was convened in September in conjunction with the Earthwatch organisation, focussing on Biosphere reserves and including speakers with experience of the Bookmark Biosphere reserve in South Australia. The range of speakers and topics featured at the seminar illustrated the very broad scope for diverse sustainability issues to be tackled in a Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve, and the large attendance provided a strong indication of the level of community and organisational interest in and support for the proposal. The seminar provided an opportunity to shift attention onto the implementation phase, although despite the satisfaction that the working group felt with the quality of the nomination document it was not possible to be certain that the nomination would be successful.

In November 2002 formal advice was received from the MAB secretariat that the nomination had been successful and the new Biosphere reserve would be designated. A celebratory event was arranged on French Island, attended by Commonwealth Minister for the Environment Dr David Kemp and Secretary of the MAB Program Dr Peter Bridgewater, at which the working group was presented with the MAB certificate. Now the concept had reached a key milestone, but perhaps those sharing the celebrations underestimated the magnitude of the tasks that still lay ahead.

The BIG phase

Around the same time, Ian Morris, the MPSC Director of Sustainable Development who had convened the working group, and had worked hard to shepherd the nomination through the necessary endorsement processes, accepted a position as Chief Executive Officer of another Victorian municipality. The chairmanship of the working group, which became retitled the Biosphere Implementation Group (BIG), was taken over by MPSC Chief Executive Officer

Dr Michael Kennedy. Dr Kennedy had facilitated Council's formal support of the nomination and its substantial in kind contribution to the process, and his personal "hands on" role with BIG reflected the level of significance that the Shire, which had already branded itself as the "Sustainable Peninsula", placed on the Biosphere reserve designation. However, an unfortunate divide began to develop between those who saw strong direct government sector involvement in the Biosphere reserve as diminishing the role of the community, and those who saw active government participation as essential to the long term success of the concept. The division was perhaps fuelled by experiences with contentious development proposals in recent years which had tended to polarise environmental activists, including many who were energetic supporters of the Biosphere reserve as a major step forward for sustainability as a goal, and decision-making authorities including Council, with the Chief Executive Officer often prominent as the spokesperson for the Council as it carried out its statutory responsibilities.

BIG meetings attracted large attendances; the membership remained variable and the growth in numbers demonstrated the willingness of many people not only to support the concept in principle but to contribute their efforts towards bringing it to fruition. However, as a working group its size and flexible membership in terms of attendance at meetings made it cumbersome and unwieldy. Therefore, early in 2003, BIG established two working sub-committees, one addressing governance and the other concentrating on the vision for the Biosphere reserve.

The sub-committees met as frequently as required during 2003. The work of the "visioning" sub-committee, with its task of articulating the dream, ultimately led to the Biosphere reserve Foundation's Charter⁸, which has since been acknowledged to be an excellent expression of the principles behind delivering a Biosphere reserve in line with the Seville Strategy. The governance sub-committee was charged with keeping the "dream on rails", and examined different models of frameworks for constructing a new organisation to deliver the vision. Ultimately it adopted a preference for a formal company structure under the *Corporations Act 2001*, and developed a draft Constitution⁹ with the help of Mornington Peninsula Shire Council's solicitors, whose services were donated by the Council.

In September 2003 BIG convened a community workshop at Hastings to hear reports from the sub-committees and debate the options that were emerging. The workshop also received presentations about several projects already underway within the Biosphere reserve that could serve as examples to be followed. The workshop was well attended and a very valuable engagement exercise. However it was apparent from the discussion about the form that the Constitution was taking that it would be difficult to reach complete consensus about the detail of the Constitution, and in particular the structure of the Board.

The Foundation's first year

In December 2003, exactly twelve months after the celebrations on French Island to mark the Biosphere reserve's designation, a meeting at Hastings inaugurated the Foundation that was created to implement the Biosphere reserve vision. About 130 supporters of the Biosphere reserve, including many who had been directly involved through the working group, the Earthwatch seminar, BIG and its sub-committees or the Hastings workshop, attended, paid the nominal \$10 membership fee and voted to adopt the Constitution and the Charter. As expected from earlier feedback, there was some animated discussion about the detailed terms of the Constitution. The meeting passed a foreshadowed resolution to conduct a review of the Foundation's administrative arrangements during its second year of operation. This was to allow the fledgling Foundation to road-test the Constitution and other arrangements so that fine-tuning could be undertaken in the light of practical experience as well as the philosophically different views within the membership about the optimum governance arrangements.

During the Foundation's first year of operations Dr Kennedy served as Chairman, in accordance with the provisions of the adopted Constitution. Dr Kennedy's peer level rapport with the Chief Executive Officers of the other four Councils was pivotal to the securing of financial support for the Foundation from each Council. MPSC continued to host the Biosphere reserve's administrative arrangements, with the Project Officer who had supported BIG and its sub-committees continuing in that capacity with the new Foundation, while still formally an MPSC employee. Dr Kennedy's strong chairing skills were also valuable as the new Board began to settle in.

The Foundation's membership was organised into six regional groups called Roundtables, one for each local government area that overlapped the boundaries of the Biosphere reserve and one for French Island. The Roundtables were created to overcome the distance problems that would always make it a challenge for the membership to assemble from all around the Biosphere reserve. The Roundtables were prescribed in the Constitution, but had considerable flexibility in managing their own affairs under the Foundation umbrella. Because the Roundtables became the primary contact point with the Biosphere reserve for most active members and supporters, the need for a united Foundation that could function as a strong single entity was sometimes overlooked, but the Roundtables provided valuable fora for local participation and initiated the first tangible sustainability projects of the Foundation.

Two priorities for the Board were the development of a strategic plan for the Foundation, and the identification of the "Second Chairman". A process plan for developing a strategy was prepared, and funding sought through the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services' (DOTARS) Regional Partnerships program. Unfortunately the funding application was eventually unsuccessful, and with a Commonwealth election due at the end of the year it became apparent that alternative funding would be required, or a less costly process for strategic planning adopted. In the event, the latter course was followed, but considerable time had been lost.

Under the terms of the Constitution, Dr Kennedy's tenure as First Chairman would last until the appointment of a second Chairman or the Foundation's first Annual General Meeting, whichever came first. A Board sub-committee was appointed to identify a potential Chairman, but was unable to do so until close to the end of the year, despite approaches made to a number of possible candidates. The difficulty probably arose from the selection criteria that were applied, which were exacting, the Foundation's lack of a track record to attract potential candidates and the need for the chairmanship to be offered virtually on a voluntary basis, with only a small honorarium affordable due to the Foundation's limited resources.

Although a Chairman elect was finally identified, the run up to the AGM in November was distracted by unrest among some of the Foundation's membership, who were anxious for structural change to alter the balance of control of the Foundation. After unsuccessful discussions between some Directors and those seeking change, a proposal was launched for an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) to take place immediately before the scheduled AGM and to consider resolutions to alter the Constitution. However, legal advice indicated that the notice of the EGM was flawed and it did not proceed. The Board undertook to address the mooted changes to the Constitution in the context of the commitment to a review of administrative arrangements that dated from the inaugural meeting a year earlier. It was an organisation suffering from some serious internal philosophic differences that Second Chairman Rob Gell took over in early 2005.

The second year and the Second Chair

Rob Gell was well known in Melbourne, having appeared as a weather presenter on prime time news services for commercial television for many years. His background included post

graduate qualifications in geography, with a thesis focusing on coastal geomorphology in Western Port. He had established his own business as an environmental consultant, had extensive networks in environment, business and government and served as Chairman of Greening Australia (Victoria) and on the Victorian Coastal Council. He found himself with the task of building a viable sustainability-based organisation almost from scratch, and at the same time resolving the deep divisions that had emerged.

The Foundation's Executive Officer (retitled from Project Officer following the establishment of the Foundation) had resigned in the lead up to the AGM, so that the new Chairman's immediate priority was to lead the recruitment process for the sole paid support position. The process of refining the position description, advertising, interviewing and appointing took several months, partly due to the Christmas break, and it was April before the new Executive Officer took up her duties, still effectively employed by MPSC until the end of the 2004-05 financial year. With a new Chairman and a new Executive Officer, however, there was promise of a fresh start for the Foundation.

Fulfilment of the commitment to an administrative review of the Foundation began towards the middle of the year, with the Board's appointment of a small working group to manage the process. The working group, with a modest budget, developed and issued a discussion paper, and selected a consultant to conduct the review – solicitor and former Melbourne City Councillor David Risstrom. David conducted two workshops with interested Foundation members and supporters of the Biosphere reserve, and analysed written submissions on the discussion paper, eventually producing a comprehensive report¹⁰ containing some 71 recommendations. He also attended a meeting of the Board to report and discuss his findings. Importantly, although seventeen of the recommendations touched on constitutional matters that had been raised in the discussion paper and in submissions, none of those recommendations advised making any change to the Constitution. Other recommendations dealt with a range of internal administrative matters, including membership fees, communications and procedures.

In order to clear the air with respect to the motions that had been proposed to be put to the aborted EGM the previous year, the Board decided that the motions would be put to the 2005 AGM. One of the Foundation members who had been involved in the proposal for an EGM had served on the organisational review working group, and had reached the view during the year that the changes proposed in the motions would not in fact be in the Foundation's best interests. Accordingly, when the motions were put to the AGM, he spoke against them, and they were convincingly (but not unanimously) lost.

The Board faced further challenges with the loss of a number of Directors around the time of the 2005 AGM. Under the Constitution, First Directors served a one year term, after which second and subsequent Directors would serve terms of two years, with the proviso that half of the second Directors would retire at the second AGM, so that half the Board would be due to retire at every subsequent AGM. This measure was designed to ensure a reasonable measure of Board membership continuity. Fresh blood over time was assured by the provision that no Director could serve for more than four consecutive terms.

Because each of the five municipal areas was effectively represented on the Board by two Directors, one appointed by the Council and one elected by the Roundtable, it was decided that the terms for each such "pair" of Directors should be staggered. Local government elections were due in November 2005, and three of the five Councillor Directors were not standing for re-election, so the Board decided that those three Director positions, plus the two Roundtable Director positions in the other two local government areas, should be among those Board positions for which the second term would be a single year. However, the intentions regarding continuity were brought undone to an extent because the two Councillor Directors who were contesting the local government elections were not returned, and so after

the elections their respective Councils replaced them as Directors with serving Councillors. In fact, by early 2006, barely two years after the inauguration of the Foundation, only two First Directors still sat on the Board.

While the Board had had its difficulties, there had been some important achievements at Roundtable level. Mornington Peninsula, Frankston and Bass Coast Roundtables were active; Mornington Peninsula Roundtable housed about half of the Foundation's membership, and Frankston and Bass Coast, although smaller, had energetic leaderships and focussed on local activities. There was a small French Island Roundtable, understandable given the very small population base on which it could draw. Casey Roundtable meetings during 2004 and early 2005 drew only a handful of members, and the Roundtable became moribund and effectively went into abeyance. Cardinia, of which (like Casey) only the coastal fringe was technically included in the Biosphere reserve, already had a strong Environment Coalition, which served as the Cardinia Roundtable until the resignation of the Roundtable Director in early 2005; again the low membership impeded the development of vibrant activity programs and most Foundation members in Casey and Cardinia found outlets for their sustainability-based interests through other avenues.

The Board resolved to make the modest funds collected as membership subscriptions directly available to the relevant Roundtables to support their activities. The Roundtables also had the capacity to identify project proposals and, with Board approval, apply for grant funds from available programs. Over time, a range of activities and projects were generated by the Roundtables:

Project	Roundtable	Start	Funding/ Partners	Status
Community Forum	Bass Coast	2004/05	Urban Landcare	Event
Sustainable business recognition program	Bass Coast	2005/06	Envirofund, Urban Landcare	Ongoing
Nobbies Visitor Centre display	Bass Coast	2006/07		Ongoing
Southern Brown Bandicoot (SBB) conservation	Frankston	2004/05	Envirofund, Research Committee, Councils	Ongoing
Climate change forum	Frankston	2004/05	Council, Western Port Greenhouse Alliance (WPGA)	Event
Ecological footprint workshop	Mornington Peninsula	2004/05	-	Event
Habitat planting	Mornington Peninsula	2004/05	Schools	Completed
Organic farming support	French Island	2004/05	-	Ongoing
SBB: The Pines Reserve	Frankston	2005/06	Research Committee, Council, Parks Victoria, community	Fixed term
Seagrass & mangrove recovery	Bass Coast	2005/06	Western Port Seagrass Partnership	Ongoing
“Waterline” (“sea-change” community building)	Bass Coast	2005/06	Council, community	Proposal
Climate change forum	Frankston	2005/06	Council, WPGA	Event
SBB: private property populations	Frankston	2005/06	Casey & Cardinia Councils, landowners	Proposal
Eco-footprint	Frankston	2005/06	Council	Ongoing
Film nights	Mornington	2005/06	Red Hill School	Event

	Peninsula			
Watson Creek	Mornington Peninsula	2005/06	Council, parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, others	Ongoing
Water savings at schools	Mornington Peninsula	2005/06	Community Water Fund, schools	Fixed term

Table 1: Examples of Roundtable projects over the Foundation’s first three years

Beyond the second year

The Board’s focus, once the organisational review had been completed and its aftermath at the 2005 AGM concluded, was to develop a strategic plan. In the absence of the considerable funds that had been unsuccessfully sought through DOTARS, a much leaner process was followed, and a “Living Strategy” format, along the lines of a model adopted by the Dolphin Research Institute, was selected. There was also action on governance principles for Directors. The Board approved arrangements for the development of a website¹¹, and that work eventually commenced in the latter part of 2006 after several false starts.

In late 2006 also, the Foundation initiated a project aimed at improved integrated catchment management of Watson Creek, a small waterway with a catchment shared across three municipalities (although mostly in Mornington Peninsula Shire) that had previously been identified as one of the most polluted streams in Victoria. This status was of particular concern as the creek’s mouth is in the north-western corner of Western Port, within the recently gazetted Yaringa Marine National Park. With modest seed funding from Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, the Foundation appointed a part-time Project Officer on a six-month contract to set the groundwork in place for a comprehensive attempt to improve the water quality in the creek. The vision was for a catchment-wide program, with broad-based community support.

In early 2007 the Foundation’s Executive Officer resigned, and at the time of writing the new Executive Officer has just commenced duties. The Foundation is strongly based structurally, but yet to deliver systematic benefits on a scale consistent with its organisational weight. In the absence of an enhanced, independent and reliable income, it may be difficult for the Foundation to meet the ambitious expectations encapsulated in its Charter. The challenge for the next phase will be for the Foundation to adopt a fully unified approach to its stated aims of leading the way towards sustainability in the region, and to begin to make a real difference.

Discussion

The history of the fledgling Foundation has been given at some length, to underline the complexity of the organisation’s evolution and culture. A particular feature of that history has been conflict between supporters of the Biosphere concept who have differed, sometimes heatedly, about the way the organisation should be structured, managed and led to achieve its aims. There have also been differences of opinion about the best ways to prioritise tasks in the context of the multi-faceted nature of sustainability, and concerns about the extent to which, and methods by which, the Foundation should champion sustainability principles with regard to specific land use development proposals.

The Biosphere reserve nomination resulted from a combined effort by diverse parties which shared a common interest (or what they believed to be a common interest) in the benefits of the designation of a Biosphere reserve. Those parties contributed a complementary set of resources and skills to the demanding task of preparing a nomination, and co-operated to such good effect that the nomination was successful. While some of the parties had not always fully shared each others’ views, on a range of philosophical and specific issues associated

with natural resource management and land use and development, the focus of the Biosphere reserve concept on the broad principles of biodiversity conservation and sustainability enabled the parties to focus on those common interests rather than on their historical differences.

Following the designation of the Biosphere reserve, it became necessary to get down to details. Perhaps because setting up a governance framework required many details to be fixed, the governance sub-committee experienced more contention than the visioning sub-committee, which oversaw the preparation of the Charter. The Charter is an encompassing document, setting out high order principles and a list of long-term objectives which did not present serious immediate challenges. The Constitution, however, prescribes requirements that demanded immediate decisions, and the formal adoption of the Constitution comprised endorsement of the outcomes of some of those decisions (such as the appointment of the First Chairman) and the approval of the framework that would shape the new Foundation’s mode of operations from its inception. The need to fix the details through the Constitution inevitably focused attention on those areas of disagreement.

Participation in terms of “engagement”

In recent years the discipline of community engagement has developed a format for categorising levels of engagement. In those terms, participation can take on a variety of forms, from wholly passive to fully controlling.

Inform >	Consult >	Involve >	Collaborate >	Empower
Be told >	Be asked >	Be included >	Be a partner >	Be in control

Table 2: Spectrum of engagement and invitation to stakeholders (derived from IAP2¹²)

Using that language, the concerns of some parties around the Board structure enshrined in the Constitution could be ascribed to beliefs that those parties should have been engaged at the empowerment end of the spectrum, but had been given only collaborative, involved or even consultative roles. In particular, the balance of the Board was seen by some non-government parties as being skewed in favour of appointed Directors, who outnumbered the Directors elected by the membership of the Foundation (see table). The Constitutional role of Dr Kennedy was also viewed with suspicion by some parties, as imposing an undue degree of Mornington Peninsula Shire Council influence (“empowerment”) on the implementation of a concept that had been driven by a broad coalition of stakeholders.

Constituency	Appointed	Elected	Other
Minister for Environment	✓		
Parks Victoria	✓		
Bass Coast Shire Council	✓		
Cardinia Shire Council	✓		
Casey City Council	✓		
Frankston City Council	✓		
Mornington Peninsula Shire Council	✓		
Bass Coast Roundtable		✓	
Cardinia Roundtable		✓	
Casey Roundtable		✓	
Frankston Roundtable		✓	
Mornington Peninsula Roundtable		✓	
French Island Roundtable		✓	
Business/ industry representative			✓ ^a
Chairman			✓ ^b

Notes: ^a No process prescribed for filling this position (and position remains unfilled).

^b First Chair designated by Constitution; Second and subsequent Chair appointed by the Board in consultation with the Victorian Minister for the Environment.

Table 3: Board composition for Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation Ltd

There can be valid reasons for choosing to engage a particular party at a low level such as “inform”, for instance if that party has no need to contribute actively to a process but needs only to be aware of the process or its outcomes. However, contention can readily arise when a party believes itself to have been engaged at too low a level and not to have had appropriate input into the setting of that level, and hence to have been excluded from its legitimate role in influencing or determining an outcome.

Therefore, engagement needs should be assessed in terms of the level of engagement sought by a party, as well as the level “allowed” by the party or parties in control of the process. Engagement may be conducted on a representative basis, where it is not practicable to engage all members of an interest group in full depth. Representative approaches can be fully effective only when the method of selecting representatives is satisfactory to all members of the relevant groups.

The five step definition of levels of engagement (Table 2) in particular circumstances may be arbitrary to an extent, because it partitions what is effectively a continuum of engagement. However, given that limitation, it is possible to describe at least indicatively the effective engagement levels for different parties in the context of particular stages of the Biosphere reserve’s history. At the same time, it is important to remember that some of the parties are multi-faceted and not all components were necessarily engaged at the same level, nor were all parties necessarily engaged at the same level throughout a particular stage of the process, so the table is a summary rather than a fully detailed description.

Party Stage	Fed Govt	State Govt	Local Govt	Agencies	Business	Community groups	Community	Board	Roundtables	Membership
Nomination	Emp	Coll	Emp	Inv	Cons- Inv	Inf-Coll	Coll	-	-	-
BIG Governance	Inf	Coll	Emp	Cons	Cons	Inv	Coll	-	-	-
BIG Visioning	Inf	Cons	Emp	Cons	Cons	Inv	Coll	-	-	-
BIG general	Inf	Inv	Emp	Cons	Cons	Inv	Coll	-	-	-
Board	Inf	Emp	Emp	Inf	Emp	Inf	Inf	-	Emp	Emp
Executive	-	Emp	Emp	-	-	-	-	Emp	Emp	Inf
Roundtables	-	Cons	Inv	Cons	Inv	Inv	Inf	Coll	-	Emp
Research Committee	Inf	Cons	Cons	Inv	Inf	Cons	Inf	Coll	Inv	Cons
Organisational Review	-	Inv	Inv	Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons	Emp	Inv	Emp
SBB project	Inv	Inv	Coll	Coll	Cons	Cons	Inv	Emp		Inv
SBR project	-	Inf	Inf	Inf	Coll	Inf	Inf	Emp	Emp	Inv
W Ck project	-	Inv	Coll	Coll	Inv	Inv	Inv	Coll	Inv	Cons
Strategy	-	Inf	Cons	Cons	Inf	Inf	Inf	Emp	Inv	Cons

Inf = Inform. Cons = Consult. Inv = Involve. Coll = Collaborate. Emp = Empower

Table 4: Indicative levels of engagement by development stages, structure and activities

The Board has sought to be inclusive of the key sectors in managing the business of the Foundation. For example, an Executive was established to enable routine decision-making between Board meetings, especially after the Board adopted a bi-monthly meeting cycle. From the end of the first year the Executive included the Chair and a Director from each basic sector represented on the Board (state government, local government and roundtables). This reflected the availability of the requisite skills as well as the desire to maintain a representative Executive.

Some of the concerns implicit in the debate about Board representation and the motions that were to have been put to the proposed EGM in 2004 relate to different expectations about levels of influence (or engagement) for non-government sectors. In turn this relates to differing interpretations of “democratic, inclusive, accessible and reflective of local communities” as articulated in the nomination. Some community members have seen this intention as excluding formal government or authority participation in the governance of the Biosphere reserve. However, government sectors at State and local levels have seen themselves as included in the “community”, and the appointment of representatives of the Minister for the Environment and of the five local government councils as reflecting democratic principles.

While there has been contention involved in managing participation in the governance of the Foundation, less contention has arisen in other areas. Preparation of the nomination was a participative achievement of some distinction, given its complexity, resource demands and the challenges of meeting the timelines. The Charter is an excellent product of a participative process. Many of the projects undertaken in the name of the Biosphere reserve have been collaborative efforts involving multiple partners that have each contributed according to their skills and resources.

Conclusions

The challenges for the Biosphere reserve Foundation in its fourth year remain complex and sometimes paradoxical. Participation in the sense of membership remains low, especially given the population (sometimes referred to as the “membership in waiting”) of the geographic area. Functional Roundtables are yet to be established in Cardinia and Casey, while French Island will require ongoing support.

The Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere reserve experience of participation in the context of sustainability, although complex and at times mixed, does have some valuable lessons. A prerequisite for full, unconstrained participation is trust. Environment groups’ engagement with local and State government had predominantly been in circumstances characterised by confrontational rather than co-operative settings. Government sectors on their part were reserved about empowerment of the community sector when there was uncertainty whether all parties shared the same sustainability agenda. The limited trust between the parties, as well as the diverse views about sustainability priorities, undoubtedly contributed to the slow and somewhat disjointed progress during the first years after the success of the nomination.

However, much has been achieved that reinforces the value of the participative approach. State and local government bodies can observe that the fears or concerns held about the Biosphere reserve concept early in the process have proved to be unfounded. The Foundation has survived into its fourth year and is building momentum. Through the Biosphere reserve new participative fora have been created - the Roundtables and the Research Committee – leading to innovative, co-operative sustainability projects. Events under the Biosphere banner, generally conducted in partnership with other organisations, have attracted and energised large audiences.

In particular, it is the key principle of partnership that distinguishes the Biosphere reserve Foundation. The Board is a partnership of State and local government appointees and elected representatives of the membership. The Research Committee is a partnership of government, non-government and education sector research bodies as well as community representatives. The Living Strategy, along with earlier documents such as the nomination and the Charter, enshrines the pivotal need for partnership. Projects generated at Roundtable level feature partners from a range of sectors, often creating productive links that otherwise might never have eventuated. And participation is key to partnership.

This appraisal has been written from the perspective of a participant, and reflects a single point of view. As the fifth anniversary of the Biosphere reserve's designation approaches, it would be timely for a formal, objective evaluation of the Biosphere reserve to be carried out, involving research of both the quantitative achievements of the Foundation and qualitative data about the perceptions of participants and partners.

Note: The author has served as the nominee of the Minister for the Environment on the Board of the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation since its inauguration, and prior to that worked on the nomination and on the BIG governance sub-committee. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and should not be taken to have the endorsement of the Minister, the Department of Sustainability and Environment or the Board of the Foundation.

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